

Cursed Couple

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Cursed Couple

by [shorimochi](#)

Summary

Due to an unfortunate circumstance, Lan Qiren found himself accidentally brought back to the past, where he was still a young man, everyone dead was now alive while everyone alive was not yet born.

He also discovered that the young Wen Ruohan might not be the ruthless, power-hungry man he grew up to be. Could he change the future, maybe?

Lan Qiren certainly did not expect he would have to seduce Wen Ruohan to do that.

Notes

I was admittedly surprised to see this tag already exists. I guess this is kinda a Dumbledore/Grindelward situation?

Here I thought, even if I write this pairing who'd want to read it, but hey, there's an audience for everything... XD

The setting follows mostly The Untamed plot. Everyone's age has been butchered by me who can't figure out character's ages; and nameless characters have been named.

- Translation into Русский available: [Cursed Couple](#) by [Bomzhechmo](#)
- Translation into Español available: [Cursed Couple](#) by [shen_111](#)

First meeting

"Wangji, take control of your spouse!" Lan Qiren angrily uttered.

Three years had passed since Lan Wangji had taken in that rampant, uncouth young lad to be his spouse and Lan Qiren had eventually accepted that just like his father and their ancestors, Lan Wangji was just too passionate when it came to love and could not be stopped. Rather than continuing to fight a lost cause, he would rather just make amends with his nephew (the new rule forbidding people to come near Wei Wuxian was blatantly ignored by everyone in Cloud Recess, unfortunately).

Lan Qiren had learned that perhaps in the end, even after years of living his judgement was still skewed by prejudice and immature emotions. He realized that upon learning of Jin Guangyao's schemes and betrayal, as well as how Wei Wuxian had actually in fact saved (or tried to, at least) the day. Lan Xichen entered seclusion, Lan Wangji took over the lead and Lan Qiren decided a conflict between family members was the last thing their clan needed. Unity was more important than old grudges and whether he liked it or not, Wangji would only love one person in his life, just like how Qingheng Jun had only loved that one woman in his life.

That still didn't mean he couldn't try to reform Wei Wuxian's horrendous manners, though. Flirting in the middle of a formal banquet, how shameless can that young man be? He acted as if nobody could see his hand sneaking into Wangji's robes!

Lan Qiren decided that since Wei Wuxian had married into Lan Clan, he ought to learn the ways of Lan Clan.

With his newfound determination he carried a Lan Clan 'family only' exclusive guide to embracing proper manners and headed over to Jingshi the following day, early in the morning.

Lan Wangji was already out and teaching the disciples but Lan Qiren knew Wei Wuxian was probably still asleep inside. He knocked on the door and heard no answer. Feeling irritated, he knocked three more times before he impatiently decided to just enter and wake the young man himself.

True enough, he could see Wei Wuxian splayed half on the bed and another half on the floor, still snoring. Such poor manners! He angrily stomped inside - not realising that he had stepped onto a crumpled piece of paper.

The next thing Lan Qiren knew, everything had turned dark.

"Qiren. Qiren, are you okay?"

Lan Qiren frowned. His head hurt, it felt like everything was spinning. Lan Qiren opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the familiar ceiling of his room.

Followed by his brother's youthful face. Which was weird because his brother had passed away long ago, back when Cloud Recesses was burned during the Qishan Wen attack. Lan Qiren would never forget that.

He closed his eyes again. Must be a dream.

Then Qingheng Jun shook his shoulders, this time more roughly. "Qiren, wake up!"

Lan Qiren's eyes popped open. He finally looked at his brother's worried face straight. "... Xiongzhong?"

Qingheng Jun knit his eyebrows. "Are you feeling pain anywhere? You suddenly fainted in the middle of our lesson."

"..." Lan Qiren slowly sat up. He was not dreaming. His brother was indeed there, still alive, and looking two decades younger than Lan Qiren remembered him.

"Qiren?" Qingheng Jun questioned again when Lan Qiren hastily got out of his bed and rushed to look at the mirror.

Lan Qiren paled. He was younger. A lot younger. There were no lines and creases formed from years of frowning over problematic students, his face was devoid of any moustache or goatee, and his skin was more taut and fair. He looked to be probably around seventeen to eighteen.

Lan Qiren wasn't sure how it exactly happened, but he knew he had been brought back to the past now, and there was only one person to be blamed.

"Wei Wuxian!!!!!"

After reassuring his brother that no, he had not lost his mind yet and yes, it was only a bad dream, Lan Qiren returned to class. Sure enough, the familiar faces he had encountered during his youth were all there. The soft spoken Jiang Fengmian and his quiet right-hand man Wei Changze, the former Nie Clan's leader Nie Yizhou, as well as their other classmates.

Cangse Sanren would come later, after Lan Qiren started growing a beard - which she shaved off for fun, that little devil. Jin Guangshan should have already finished his studies - good thing, because Lan Qiren wouldn't have the stomach to even look at that man without having any desire to castrate him for spawning Jin Guangyao and many other catastrophes.

"Are you feeling fine now, Second Young Master Lan?" Jiang Fengmian asked him.

Lan Qiren nodded. "It was nothing, thank you for your concern." It was a little weird being called Young Master after years of living as someone's uncle.

Wei Changze only smiled calmly. "It's good that it's nothing serious."

Sometimes Lan Qiren wondered why there was not an ounce of Wei Changze's calm personality that his son inherited. Ah, if only Wei Wuxian could be as calm and collected as this man, Lan Qiren wouldn't have to suffer as many headaches. It was thanks to him, that Lan Qiren was in this predicament now. How was he supposed to get back to his time?

Classes ended without Lan Qiren able to even think of a solution. Time travel was not something ever successfully achieved by any cultivator, Lan Qiren didn't think he had ever encountered any scrolls or books on time travel in their library. He decided to go and browse more, before Jiang Fengmian suddenly patted his shoulder.

"Second Young Master Lan, the three of us are going to fish. Do you care to join us?"

No, Lan Qiren wanted to say. However, he remembered how Wangji stated that he had found one of the Yin Iron pieces in Cloud Recesses back then. Perhaps Lan Qiren could see if he could also find it. He nodded.

At the back he could hear his older brother's surprised but delighted hum. Understandable that Qingheng Jun would find it odd since Lan Qiren wasn't exactly the most sociable person, but why the proud face? It wasn't like he didn't know how to make friends, he just chose not to.

He followed Jiang Fengmian, Wei Changze, and Nie Yizhou to the back mountains area. While it was still part of the Gusu Lan territory, it was not considered part of Cloud Recesses, hence why disciples sometimes could go and fish there, and Wangji would keep his rabbits around here.

While the four of them were walking he tried to gauge their abilities. It seemed like at this time Nie Yizhou had the highest cultivation level, followed by himself and then Jiang Fengmian or Wei Changze. Though, it was actually hard to determine Wei Changze's ability. He was the complete opposite of his wife and son, he didn't like to stand out much, preferring to only stay next to Jiang Fengmian.

... As if everyone's cultivation level matters now, Lan Qiren suddenly thought bitterly. Out of four of them now, he was the only one surviving in the future. Wei Wuxian could hardly even

remember his parents' faces and both Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian were killed when their sons were still teenagers.

They arrived at the river. Nie Yizhou wanted to use his cultivation to catch fish but Wei Changze stated that there would be no enjoyment for that, and capturing fish on their own would be a good way to train their reflex and speed anyway. Lan Qiren only wandered around the river, not caring about the fish much. The Yunmeng folks who were used to having extra spices in their cuisine might be bored and wanted to have a change in their tastebuds but Lan Qiren grew up and was used to the bland meals of Cloud Recesses.

He walked further, finding himself closer to the border where the special wards were put up, and frowned when he noticed that one of the wards had been broken. There was a tiniest hint of intrusion, undetected and Lan Qiren wondered how the perpetrator managed to get in without alerting any members.

"My, looks like I've been caught."

Lan Qiren turned around and felt cold blood rushing.

He was two decades younger now but Lan Qiren recognized that face. Tall and handsome, with sharp prominent features and deep eyes - it was the young Wen Ruohan, lounging leisurely on top of a big boulder. Lan Qiren could still recall seeing this youthful face, only several years older than him, back in his own younger days.

Lan Qiren narrowed his eyes and gripped his sword. "How did you get in here? How dare you intrude into Cloud Recesses!"

Wen Ruohan snorted. He stood up, patting the dust off his robes and jumped down from the big boulder. "Not on purpose. I was out on a night hunt, I didn't expect this place to be part of Gusu Lan's territory."

Lan Qiren rolled his eyes. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

Wen Ruohan laughed. He walked closer towards Lan Qiren, feeling amused at the way the latter was so blatantly wary of him. "Now, I'm apologizing, so brush that frown away from your face. A beauty like you should not be scowling like that, what a waste."

Lan Qiren gawked. "Ridiculous! If you know you've trespassed, why are you still here?"

Wen Ruohan chuckled. "Well, I was just trying to affirm if the rumours about the Lans being unparalleled beauties are true. Seems like words passed around did not do you justice - you're more beautiful than I thought."

"I've heard rumours that the Wens are prideful but it seems that they forget to include mannerless too," Lan Qiren snapped.

Wen Ruohan smirked and Lan Qiren had to consciously remind himself that the man was just hiding his cruel, devious nature behind that charming smile. Wen Ruohan took another step closer to Lan Qiren and boldly placed his fingers on Lan Qiren's jaw to lift his face up.

"They forget to mention how the Lans are even more attractive when they speak," Wen Ruohan purred.

Unwilling to tolerate any taunts more Lan Qiren unsheathed his sword and lunged at Wen Ruohan who avoided it skillfully.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. "I thought fighting is not allowed in Cloud Recess?"

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth. "We are not in the compound of Cloud Recess, and exterminating pests are certainly allowed!"

Wen Ruohan laughed. He blocked another attack with a still sheathed sword, much to Lan Qiren's frustration. "Why don't we make a bet, Young Master Lan?"

"Gambling is forbidden in Cloud Recess!"

"Ah, but you just said this is not part of the compound," Wen Ruohan chuckled. "If you beat me, I will leave. If I beat you, you need to meet me at Caiyi Town tonight and buy me a drink."

"Alcohol is forbidden." Another attack blocked and Lan Qiren grew angrier.

"Caiyi Town is not part of Cloud Recess so I will consider that an agreement," said Wen Ruohan.

Lan Qiren spun his body and aimed for a kick but Wen Ruohan was quicker. He blocked Lan Qiren's attack with his sword, then unsheathed the blade from its scabbard and thrust the sharp point towards Lan Qiren's arm. He pinned the latter's long white sleeve down to the ground without hitting any flesh, effectively bringing him down. For a whole ten seconds Lan Qiren inadvertently forgot to breathe, only staring up at Wen Ruohan who was hovering above him.

Wen Ruohan smirked. He got up, pulled out his sword and sheathed it back into its scabbard. "Tonight, I will be expecting to have a beauty drinking Emperor's Smile with me," he said before leaving, casually passing through the wards of Cloud Recess without putting any extra ounce of effort.

Lan Qiren trembled furiously. Damn it!

Seeing the grin on Wen Ruohan's face that night made Lan Qiren really regret his decision. He turned around and decided to go back but was stopped by the brazen man grabbing his hand. Wen Ruohan smirked, one hand not letting go while the other hand holding a jar of Emperor's Smile. "I didn't expect that you'd actually show up."

"I'm going home then," Lan Qiren stated.

“Now now, you’re already here, why not just stay and have a drink?” Wen Ruohan said, using his superhuman strength to pull Lan Qiren to sit beside him.

Lan Qiren scowled and glanced around. It was loud and rowdy and not a place he would ever want to be at all. “I do not expect someone like you to be in this rundown, cheap inn at all. Is your sect too stingy to afford a better inn or restaurant? Caiyi Town has better places than this.”

Wen Ruohan burst out laughing. “And I do not expect a young master from a clan that originates from an ascetic cultivator to care about this kind of thing. Well, they sell the same alcohol at a cheaper price, so why not? Besides, nobody would expect to see someone like me here as you point out, and I do enjoy some amount of privacy once in a while.”

Lan Qiren noticed something. "Are you alone? What about your subordinates? You're the clan heir."

Wen Ruohan looked a little surprised. He smiled. "While I am wearing my clan robes, I'm surprised you know who exactly I am."

"I've seen you before," Lan Qiren said.

"Really? How is it possible that we've encountered each other before but I did not remember a beauty like you?"

"Shows how you're only paying lip-service now. You would only remember those who you think as threats," Lan Qiren accused.

"I'm hurt. We barely know each other but you bear this much prejudice towards me. Have I done something?"

Not now, but in the future. As if Lan Qiren could forget how his older brother died, his older nephew was forced to flee and his younger nephew got his two legs broken. Still, Lan Qiren couldn't help noticing how this young Wen Ruohan was really different from the older, power-hungry Wen Ruohan. He seemed more laidback and friendly. What changed?

"If you only have nonsense to speak of, I'm leaving," Lan Qiren announced.

"Breaking promise, young master? We've clashed blades and we're sitting together but you haven't even told me your name," Wen Ruohan said.

"Not important enough for you to remember," Lan Qiren snapped.

But Wen Ruohan grabbed his wrist and gazed into his eyes. "I will decide that."

"Find out yourself."

"... Fine. In exchange, have a cup, just one, and I'll let you go for the night," Wen Ruohan coaxed. He poured a cup and pushed it towards Lan Qiren. He shrugged. "We're not in Cloud Recess now. A cup won't hurt, right? Unless you're too fragile to withstand a single cup~"

Lan Qiren angrily grabbed the cup and downed it in one go. "There, satisfied?" He uttered angrily before his face fell flat onto the table and completely blacked out.

Wen Ruohan blinked. "... Young master?"

"..."

The Qishan Wen heir giggled. "Seriously, after just one cup? You really are too funny."

Placing several coins on the table, he sighed and picked up Lan Qiren's body, carrying it to his room.

And that was how Lan Qiren found himself the following morning - lying next to the half-naked future enemy in bed, with a terrible hangover.

For a whole ten seconds he completely panicked.

However, realising that other than his boots and outermost robes, he was fully clothed, Lan Qiren felt relieved. Nothing should have happened last night, he would have known - being the uncle-in-law of a very shameless cut-sleeve, he was not completely in the dark when it came to that matter. He fixed his appearance and did not forget to doodle on Wen Ruohan's face before tip-toeing out of the room. Sometimes, a petty revenge makes a very satisfying one.

Lan Qiren returned to Cloud Recesses and decided to punish himself by isolating himself in the Library Pavilion and copying the rules a hundred times. He probably needed this punishment badly, with how absurd he had acted last night. What was he thinking, going to see Wen Ruohan? He must have lost his mind. Drinking with a future enemy who would only bring destruction to Cloud Recesses?

He did not realize that he had spent the entirety of the day in Library Pavilion copying texts, until somebody patted his shoulder gently. Lan Qiren looked up and saw that it was Wei Changze. He had brought a piece of steamed bun with him.

Wei Changze smiled. "Qingheng Jun noticed you weren't around last night and assumes you're here to punish yourself. You should still eat, Young Master Lan."

Lan Qiren awkwardly accepted the bun. "Thank you, Young Master Wei."

"Is there something bothering your mind, Young Master Lan?" Wei Changze asked.

"Nothing you should be concerned about," Lan Qiren answered coldly.

"I may not be a calligraphy expert but I can tell from your strokes that your heart is in a turmoil," Wei Changze said. "Still, if you need someone to just talk to, I can be your listener."

Lan Qiren hesitated.

Frankly, he had been on the fence about his problem. Normally he would have shared any troubles he had with his older brother, but after the things Qingheng Jun had done - marrying Madam Lan and going against the clan, locking up his wife and abandoning his sons for his brother to raise - Lan Qiren had lost faith in his older brother. It was the reason why he could never get to talk about the time travel to anyone.

Wei Changze...

Lan Qiren looked at Wei Changze's sincere eyes. He sighed.

"Hear me out first. It's going to sound unbelievable but just hear me out first."

He told everything to Wei Changze. From how he came from the future due to whatever tricks Wei Wuxian had pulled off, to the disasters that happened in the future. He told Wei Changze about the impending deaths of their friends and the war that caused everyone to suffer. Throughout his whole, condensed version of the decades he had been living through, Wei Changze remained silent and patiently listened.

"And that is what happened. While you three were fishing, I encountered Wen Ruohan and lost a fight. I had a drink with him and..." Lan Qiren sighed. "I don't know what to do."

Wei Changze hummed. "It's honestly going to take me some time to process everything but..."

"You believe me?" Lan Qiren asked.

"Lying is forbidden in Cloud Recess," Wei Changze smiled. "Anyway, so far aside from interacting with Wen Ruohan you have not done anything else to change the future, right?"

Lan Qiren nodded. He feared the butterfly effect that would come with the changes. As much as he did not like Madam Lan, she did give birth to his two nephews and he wouldn't want to give them up for anything. Wei Wuxian might be a menace but he did invent plenty of useful things and he was one of the reasons Lan Sizhui was in Gusu Lan, and Lan Qiren absolutely adored Sizhui. There were just so many things that could change and they could either be good and bad.

"Even if we remove Wen Ruohan from his position, or from this world," Wei Changze coughed. "There will be people who'd take his place and those people could be even worse than Wen Ruohan. You mentioned after Wen Ruohan was gone, Jin Guangshan and Jin Guangyao became the chief cultivator, and their rulings weren't the best either."

Lan Qiren nodded.

"Rather than risking the unforeseen butterfly effect, all we need to do is to maintain things as they are," Wei Changze said.

Lan Qiren's eyes widened. "But, Young Master Wei - did you not hear what I said? You and your wife died early. Young Master Jiang and his wife died. Young Master Nie was also killed because of the Wen Clan's doing."

Wei Changze smiled. "I did not say we have to keep everything the same. Sometimes, changing the bare minimum will give the greatest impact."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you not say that the young Wen Ruohan does not act like the ruthless leader he is in the future?"

Lan Qiren nodded.

Wei Changze hummed. "And this Yin Iron, laden with so much negative energy has the power to affect someone's emotion, as demonstrated with my future son. Is it possible that obtaining the Yin Iron has made Wen Ruohan change as well?"

"Then...?"

"We need to stop him from getting the Yin Iron. If we were to fail, we need someone to help anchor his emotions. Since we don't know how he obtained the first piece, the second option sounds more viable."

"What do you mean?"

Wei Changze smiled. "Young Master Lan, I think Wen Ruohan is fairly intrigued about you, to say the least. Why not befriend him? Keep your friend close, and your enemy closer."

Lan Qiren gawked. "What?"

Wei Changze nodded. "Seems to me like his sons were the ones to execute most of the damages. How about stop him from even creating his sons, then?"

"... And how do we do that?"

Wei Changze looked at Lan Qiren pointedly.

"Two men can't give birth."

"..."

Lan Qiren knew the similarity between Wei Wuxian and his father now. They were both crazy.

The doppelganger spirit

Chapter Notes

Oh look it's another chapter

“Hear me out, Young Master Lan-”

“No, no, no - you’re crazy. I shouldn’t have spoken to you. You’re mad!” Lan Qiren nearly wailed if not because they were walking along the hallways and his loud voice would be heard.

Wei Changze blinked. “Why? It is a viable option.”

“What makes you think colluding with the enemy is a viable option?” Lan Qiren hissed. “Associating with evil is against Gusu Lan’s principles!”

“He’s not an enemy yet and we don’t know for sure where the source of evil comes from,” Wei Changze pointed. “You’re already here, with no knowledge on how to return yet. You can’t possibly plan to do nothing and just wait for everyone’s death, right?”

Lan Qiren’s eyes twitched. “I did not think you would actually suggest me to get together with the enemy to stop him. I don’t even like men.”

“You don’t like women either.”

Lan Qiren could not refute that, being he indeed did not get married (or experience a love life, ever, but nobody needed to know that). He spent the past decades dedicating himself to raising his nephews and teaching disciples, marriage was something he never considered, and a romantic interest was something he never found.

“It’s safe to say that you don’t like anyone aside from your future nephews and your grandnephew, so that puts Wen Ruohan on the same level as everyone else,” Wei Changze concluded.

“Your reasoning is skewed. Even if I agree to your ridiculous suggestion, what makes you think Wen Ruohan can be swayed?” Lan Qiren gritted his teeth.

“He’s interested in you. It’s not impossible. Even if it is-”

“Do not push your clan’s stupid motto onto me.”

“Calling it stupid is insulting, Young Master Lan.”

"Implying that I should seduce Wen Ruohan is also insulting. There are things that are impossible but worth trying and there are things that are impossible as well as a waste of time," Lan Qiren strictly stated.

"Trying to ensure our survival is not a waste of time."

"Yes, but seducing the enemy to do it is the stupidest way of survival that I've ever heard," Lan Qiren gritted his teeth.

Wei Changze smiled. "I apologize. It does sound ridiculous."

Finally.

"Let's reword it. We are trying to befriend someone who can potentially be our enemy, with the hopes that we can bring him to our side, through a more intimate means."

Nope.

"What are you two bantering about?" Jiang Fengmian and Nie Yizhou appeared and came to them. "A rare combination. I was wondering where you were, Changze."

Wei Changze smiled. "I happened to come across Qingheng Jun and was asked to bring some snacks for his brother. Young Master Lan was staying in the library without eating and drinking all day."

"That's not good for your health," Jiang Fengmian said.

Nie Yizhou sneered. "Cloud Recess food has finally bore him enough to not even want to eat. How about going out tonight?"

"Not appropriate to say that about other sect's food, Young Master Nie," Wei Changze chuckled.

Jiang Fengmian laughed. "Who's the one who brought chili oil and poured it in every food, huh?"

Wei Changze hummed. "I believe there is no rule against using condiments, right, Young Master Lan?"

Lan Qiren's eyes twitched. "There is not but you would do good to refrain yourself."

Wei Changze had a strange glint in his eyes. "Restraints put a limit on your potential. I do not believe you should put a limit on your potential, it diminishes the possibilities that you may have. Do you not agree, Young Master Lan?"

Lan Qiren clenched his fists. "If this is about that thing again... I'm telling you, I'm not going to go along with your suggestion."

"What are you two talking about?" Nie Yizhou asked.

"None of your business," Lan Qiren snapped.

"Young Master Nie has a lot of experience, let us hear his experience a little," Wei Changze calmly disagreed with him. "Young Master Nie, hypothetically, let's say you're acquainted with someone whom you know will do something terrible in the future. However, the current him is not such a bad person. What would you do?"

Nie Yizhou frowned. "Is this about Jin Guangshan?"

Wei Changze shook his head. "No, but why are you mentioning Young Master Jin?"

"Everyone's been talking about him lately. As soon as he's out of Gusu and back in Lanling, he has been going out drinking every night and visiting brothels as pleased."

Jiang Fengmian's ears perked up. "I heard about that too. They say Madam Jin is trying to find a bride candidate from Meishan Yu to straighten him up."

Meishan Yu was a sect that produced many powerful, strong-willed female cultivators. Lan Qiren was aware that Yu Ziyuan and Jin Zixuan's mother were both from the famed Meishan Yu and were good friends, which was why they were so keen on betrothing their children. Lan Qiren wasn't that big on arranged marriage - Gusu Lan never had a strong opinion about arranged marriage. They were a clan with a history of having members who were passionate in romance, they either get married on their own accord or they just don't.

Nie Yizhou snorted. "I'd say someone like Jin Guangshan is better off turned into a eunuch. Even though his cultivation is not bad, he has a horrible personality. Many female disciples complained about him leering at them."

Jiang Fengmian shuddered. "Don't you think it's too harsh? He is a man with too much lust indeed but what if he changes after marriage?"

Lan Qiren rolled his eyes. Nope, Jin Guangshan only got worse. He was still as lecherous and on top of that became cruel and power-hungry. He even raped his own subordinate's wife, resulting in his children accidentally engaging in incest. Jin Guangshan's reputation was known even to the civilians, he died from overexertion in bed. An embarrassment he was, even in death.

The only good thing that came out of Jin Guangshan was perhaps Jin Zixuan. Which now got Lan Qiren to start thinking.

If Jin Guangshan was removed from his current position, the one taking over his place would be his brother, who was Jin Zixun's father. Everyone would unanimously agree that if Jin Zixuan was the sky (which he was not anyway), Jin Zixun would be the dirt (hm, would that make Jin Zixun worse than dirt?). He had so much pride when he was only the Sect Leader's nephew, Lan Qiren couldn't imagine if he was the sect heir.

... Wei Changze was right. Keeping changes to a bare minimum was the best.

Still...!

Lan Qiren cleared his throat. "Alright, let me ask you a question. If you are given the choice to stop someone whom you'd know could be your enemy in the future by... cough, courting them, what would you do?"

Both Jiang Fengmian and Nie Yizhou immediately looked at him. Wei Changze did not speak but only appeared amused.

"Something tells me this is personal," Jiang Fengmian grinned.

Nie Yizhou also smirked. "Young Master Lan, is there something you're not telling us?"

"Whatever you two are thinking about, you're wrong," Lan Qiren vehemently denied.

"Alright, we are going out tonight and you are telling us who the lucky maiden from the 'enemy camp' is," Nie Yizhou said.

Jiang Fengmian whistled. "I didn't think Young Master Lan is actually interested in that type. I thought you'd rather find a sweet, demure girl from your own hometown."

"Maybe he unexpectedly likes someone wilder," Nie Yizhou joked. "Rough, unladylike girls are quite charming as well."

Wei Changze muttered, "Well, he is good at disciplining. Their long ribbon is for their significant other."

"Uh? What do you mean?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

Both Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian could not understand what Wei Changze had just said but Lan Qiren's face turned beet red when he finally understood the hidden meaning of Wei Changze's words. Memories of seeing bruises and other unspeakable marks on Wei Wuxian's wrists popped into his mind and he gawked. "Wei Changze, you..."

"Hmm?"

"... Get lost!" He barked and ran to escape to his room before his mind got further corrupted.

Unfortunately Lan Qiren's plight did not end there. Wei Changze, while a little off in his head, at least was not as annoyingly persistent as Wei Wuxian and Lan Qiren appreciated that. He no longer spoke of the issue after that even though he still gave Lan Qiren an occasional soft smile that to him seemed more scheming now.

The same could not be said about Jiang Fengmian and Nie Yizhou, who occasionally still teased him and asked about the mysterious maiden. It got to the point where eventually even Qingheng Jun got wind of it and asked him about the non-existent maiden after dinner.

"I heard there has been someone who caught your interest?" Qingheng Jun asked.

Lan Qiren's eyebrows twitched. "Gossips are forbidden, Xiongzhong."

Qingheng Jun smiled. "I'm simply curious about my own brother. If there is someone, we can start preparing the gifts now, you're not too young for an engagement, or even marriage. Who is it?"

"There is no such person," Lan Qiren answered. "Those three - Young Master Nie and the others are speaking nonsense."

"... I see. Do not hesitate to tell me if you find the person, Qiren," Qingheng Jun said. "Speaking of Young Master Nie and his friends, would you invite them to join you tomorrow?"

"... Tomorrow?"

"Have you forgotten about the mission you've offered to take?"

Lan Qiren had forgotten, of course. It had been decades and he had been on hundreds, perhaps thousands of missions. He was especially eager to improve his skills back in his youth and had partook in plenty of missions outside Gusu to gain more knowledge.

“My mind has been a bit occupied lately,” he confessed. “Would you remind me of which mission, Xiongzhang?”

“It’s the case of the doppelgangers in Huanying Village,” Qingheng Jun said.

Lan Qiren was finally able to recall the mission. If his memory served him right, several people were found dead in Huanying Village and it was said that all the victims had seen apparitions of their doppelgangers the night before they mysteriously died from unknown causes. Lan Qiren never did quite find out the specifics of the case, all he did was set up wards to trap the creature that mimicked the villagers, then cleansed all the places that had sightings of the doppelgangers. There were no more mysterious deaths after that so he assumed he had successfully captured the creature in one of his traps and sent it away.

“I don’t need anyone to come with me,” said Lan Qiren.

“Still, go and bring them anyway. We can always learn from each other,” Qingheng Jun said. “I’ve already told Young Master Nie about it.”

Since it was a request from his brother, Lan Qiren could not refuse. He wondered why Qingheng Jun suddenly asked him to bring other people with him this time, though. He had never forced Lan Qiren to try and make friends with anyone before.

... Right. It was because last time Lan Qiren had agreed to go out fishing with those three out of nowhere.

The following day he found Jiang Fengmian, Nie Yizhou, and Wei Changze already waiting at the gate of Cloud Recess. Wei Changze looked as calm as always, only responding to Jiang Fengmian occasionally while Nie Yizhou looked impatient. He must have been itching to go out after being stuck attending classes for days.

“Hurry up, we’ve been waiting,” Nie Yizhou said.

“Patience is a virtue,” Lan Qiren huffed. “The doppelgangers only appear at night and it takes no longer than three hours to reach Huanying Village, why are you so impatient?”

“Young Master Nie keeps complaining that we need more practical lessons, he has been so excited to go out. If we reach early we can interview the villagers first,” said Jiang Fengmian.

“We don’t need to interview the villagers,” Lan Qiren said but realizing he might have come out arrogant, he added, “I’m well informed of the details already.”

Jiang Fengmian shrugged. “Doesn’t hurt to ask. Right, Changze?”

Wei Changze nodded. The four of them flew on their swords all the way to a small road heading to Huanying Village, then walked the rest of the way inside. It would be bad to alert the creature about the presence of cultivators. Jiang Fengmian still insisted that they should talk to the villagers and Lan Qiren chose to relent. This mission was for young disciples to learn anyway, what benefit would he have hindering their learning process by trying to solve the case quickly?

It was the same as he remembered. Ten villagers had been found dead, their bodies without any visible injuries but their heart had stopped beating and they never woke up, their bodies as cold as corpses were. The only thing similar about the victims was that the night before they were found dead, they all claimed to have seen their doppelgangers.

When Lan Qiren examined the bodies again, it was apparent to him that their life force had been sucked out of their bodies completely. It was a type of spirit that fed on life forces. On cultivators it would only massively drain their energies but on normal humans, it would be instant death. The spirit likely did not have its own form, hence the reason why it took the forms of the people it intended to attack, perhaps also to lure their victims.

“Let’s put up wards around here,” Lan Qiren said.

Jiang Fengmian looked a little surprised. “We are not going to find the spirit?”

“We’ll find the spirit by putting up the ward,” Lan Qiren reasoned. “Once we put up the wards, the spirit can’t escape. That will narrow down the area that we need to cleanse.”

“Think of how much energy you’re going to need doing it that way, cleansing such a large area,” Nie Yizhou pointed. It was a small village but still too wide of an area to cleanse entirely.

“We don’t know what the spirit looks like, trying to find it would take more effort. We should settle this case as fast as we can before another villager becomes a victim.”

Jiang Fengmian stepped up. “It might be more efficient to put up wards and cleanse the whole area if you’re alone, but have you forgotten that there are four of us here?”

Lan Qiren blinked. He had indeed forgotten that this time, he was not alone. Working in groups instead of solo meant there were other ways he could have gone through this.

Though... his mind could not help thinking about Wei Wuxian at a time like this. Wei Wuxian with his compass and his spirit-attracting flags would be able to solve this case even faster without using as much effort. However, Lan Qiren was not very certain about the mechanics behind his tools. Moreover, he did not want to use Wei Wuxian’s inventions before they were supposed to be created, that would be taking credits for someone else’s work if he were to be discovered.

“Fine. Let’s split into four and find the trace of the spirit,” said Lan Qiren.

They split into four heading towards four different directions. Lan Qiren inspected the northern area of Huanying Village, where three out of the ten victims were found dead. It was the river where the villagers often get their water supply from. Lan Qiren walked around trying to find the spot where the spiritual energy was the highest.

He spotted a figure moving swiftly - in an inhuman manner, as if it just flew straight away - across the river. He quickly leaped across the river to chase after the phantom. It moved

quickly and Lan Qiren took out a couple of talismans, sending them farther ahead of him to stop the phantom from escaping the perimeter. He could feel a slight tense on the barrier from the attempt to escape. Moving full speed through the trees, Lan Qiren navigated himself towards the spot where the phantom was attempting to break out.

He was astonished to see a familiar face in red robes glancing at him instead. For a moment Lan Qiren stood still, unmoving. "You... why are you here?"

The youth in the Wen Clan red robes gave him a dirty look before he managed to escape from the ward - due to Lan Qiren's broken concentration. Lan Qiren lunged forward to chase him but was stopped by a pair of hands pulling his waist backwards.

"Sh- who...?!!" Lan Qiren almost cursed. He turned around and was shocked to see the same handsome figure clad in red robes, smiling at him. One of his fingers was resting against his lips to silence him.

"You have just been cursed. Don't chase it, unless you want to be completely drained," Wen Ruohan whispered.

Lan Qiren held his breath. "... Alright, I get it. Let me go."

Wen Ruohan chuckled. Instead of letting go he pulled the Lan Clan young master closer to his side until Lan Qiren's back met his hard, chiseled chest. "What if I don't want to?" He purred.

Lan Qiren's eyes twitched and he moved his elbow to jab at the Wen Clan heir. Unfortunately Wen Ruohan managed to narrowly avoid the attack. "What are you doing here?" He questioned.

Wen Ruohan shrugged. "Just passing by. I happened to hear rumours about the doppelganger and decided to also investigate once I heard the village chief has sent a request to Gusu Lan for help," he said, then smiled. "Heavens are clearly on my side, for they have sent the beauty who ran away from me, back into my arms."

“... And it seems that I have incited their fury, to send me a menace from hell,” Lan Qiren scorned. “So the one I saw earlier was your doppelganger? How are you still alive and standing?”

“Really, young master. Do I look like someone who can be killed by an inferior being like that?” Wen Ruohan pretended to be offended. “How much do you know about the spirit, aside from its ability to absorb life force and mimic its victims?”

“That is as much as I know,” Lan Qiren admitted. “I do know that cultivators, unlike civilians, would be able to survive it, though their spiritual energy would be drained. Why do you still look fine?”

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “It did get me but not enough to drain my energy before I tried attacking it. The spirit is as slippery as an eel, as soon as it realizes I’m out of its league, it decided to escape.”

“You let it escape?”

Wen Ruohan winked. “I got distracted by a beauty in white, appearing as ethereal as the moonlight.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Lan Qiren uttered and turned away towards the direction where the spirit was last seen heading to.

Wen Ruohan followed him. “Did you not hear me? You’ve been cursed.”

“I did not feel anything.”

“It’s a very weak spirit so any damage inflicted can’t be easily detected. I got cursed myself, three hours ago, and I’m finally starting to feel it. Soon you’re going to feel it as well.”

“All the more reason to find the spirit.”

Wen Ruohan hastened his pace to walk by Lan Qiren’s side. “So, what idea do you have to find it?”

“Put up a ward in the whole area, narrow it down to where the spirit would be and cleanse it,” Lan Qiren stated.

“That works only if you’re willing to black out later from fatigue. It works in my favour since I can carry you to bed just like that day, but what about you?” Wen Ruohan teased.

Lan Qiren’s face flushed from embarrassment. “Shut up.”

“Rather than trying to find the spirit or cleansing the whole area, why not lure it to our side?” Wen Ruohan suggested.

Lan Qiren swallowed hard. It wasn’t like he had never thought about it. In fact, it was one of the first things he did think about. However, it would require Wei Wuxian’s level of expertise and recklessness. Lan Qiren was not a reckless person, nor was he a genius of Wei Wuxian’s level. He could remember the drawing of the spirit-attracting flag of course, but again, he was not supposed to do anything that was not yet created in this time.

.... Moreover, he had already created a huge deviation here. Not only Nie Yizhou, Jiang Fengmian, and Wei Changze were never supposed to be here on the mission with him, he was also never supposed to have encountered Wen Ruohan. Wen Ruohan in his first life likely had passed through this village without ever staying to investigate the case because Lan Qiren in that timeline had never intrigued him whatsoever.

He had to solve this mission quickly to avoid any more deviations. “How would we lure it to our side? The spirit is already aware that we’re cultivators. Unless we have something that can attract it, it will try to avoid us.”

Wen Ruohan grinned. “What are spirits attracted to, if not resentful energy?”

Lan Qiren began to feel worried. Nobody before Wei Wuxian had ever found a way to successfully manipulate resentful energy and even then, the young man had to pay a hefty price. “You can’t control resentful energy.”

Wen Ruohan took out something from his pouch. Lan Qiren’s eyes widened.

“We can’t, but I have a tool that can help us.”

Impossible.

Why... why does he have it already?

“It’s called the Yin Iron. I have just recently found it in my father’s possession and decided to borrow it for a little bit.”

Lan Qiren choked. That was the first damn piece of Yin Iron and... this uncouth man actually obtained it by stealing it from his father! “What are you doing? That’s dangerous!”

“Not if we can use it correctly. Imagine being able to control spirits with this thing. We don’t even have to fight them anymore, we can just make them fight each other,” Wen Ruohan said.

“You’re mad! You’re going to... you can’t do that!” Lan Qiren furiously said. He had seen what happened to his nephew-in-law. He had no idea Wen Ruohan actually had a similar idea as well. “That thing is going to corrode your mind!”

Wen Ruohan cupped his face and smirked. “Well, won’t the young master play me a song to soothe my soul then?”

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth and swatted his hand away. “Don’t use that. We’ll stick to my plan.”

“And drain ourselves dry? No,” Wen Ruohan said. “You’ve been cursed, we’ve both been cursed, by sunrise tomorrow we’ll be completely drained of our energy while the spirit might flee to another village.”

Lan Qiren clenched his fists. No choice.

He grabbed Wen Ruohan’s hand. “Don’t use that. I’ll buy you a drink, just don’t use that.”

Wen Ruohan stared at him. A smile curved up his lips. “Am I so cheap that I can be bought off by a drink, young master?”

Lan Qiren shut his eyes and took a deep breath. “Don’t use that here. If you stick to my plan, I’ll buy you a drink, and... I’ll tell you my name.”

Wen Ruohan smirked. He pulled Lan Qiren closer to him and whispered to his ears, “Deal.”

Two men sitting in a bathtub~

Lan Qiren had eventually sat down by the riverbanks with his potentially future enemy after a long banter. While Wen Ruohan had conceded and promised to not take out the Yin Iron again, he still was not very agreeable to Lan Qiren's plan of putting up wards throughout the entire village. Lan Qiren himself was beginning to feel the drain from the spirit's curse. At this rate by sunrise he might actually fall into a coma if he attempted to cleanse the whole area.

In his original timeline Lan Qiren did not directly encounter the spirit, and while he could not remember it well he might have taken a short rest after cleansing the area. He could not afford to lower his guard around this man, though, especially considering he already embarrassed himself by blacking out after a cup with him.

"There must be another way we can lure it out. The spirit did try to go after me, there must be something," Wen Ruohan said.

"Forget it. You're already cursed and drained, how are you going to go home if you can't even move?" Lan Qiren questioned.

Wen Ruohan winked. "You can carry me."

"No."

"Meanie."

Lan Qiren suddenly remembered something. "Back when I was chasing it, right after I was first cursed, why did you stop me from going after it? That was our chance."

"What good would it do chasing after a spirit you don't know right after getting cursed? Don't you think other victims might have tried chasing it before?" Wen Ruohan said. "By the way, did you even properly interview the villagers before you start looking for it?"

Lan Qiren frowned. "I've greeted the village chief. He already explained everything in his letter. Why?"

"Ah, well, I thought it was weird that in such a small village, they waited until ten bodies were found."

Lan Qiren frowned. That thought did not come across his mind. "People can disappear for various reasons - elopement, kidnappings, killed by wild animals. It's reasonable they didn't think to call cultivators to investigate at first. They might have tried investigating themselves first."

Wen Ruohan laughed. "Not when ten dead bodies were found, all from uncertain causes. What kind of people are the victims? Any similarity?"

"I've already checked their background. The spirit targets both men and women, old and young, who live in different parts of the village. The only different target so far is you," said Lan Qiren, handing Wen Ruohan the mission scroll containing details of all the victims.

"Because I'm far more good-looking?"

"..."

"Right, so no gender or age bias here, nor can we ascertain if it likes people with a certain type of energy or temperament since they're all dead, except for me," Wen Ruohan shrugged. "Well, when it comes to these creatures they either want someone with a specific criteria or anybody would do."

Lan Qiren sighed. Well, if it was the case of 'anybody would do' then there really was no other way to go around it other than either searching randomly, setting up a lure, or setting up a ward as he originally planned. He should just move on and perhaps get together with Nie Yizhou and the others to set up wards around the village instead of wasting time with this

annoying man. His energy might be draining but with those three to help they could solve the case without anyone fainting.

“My point still stands. We are talking about ten *dead* bodies, all claimed to have seen something unnatural, mere hours before their death,” Wen Ruohan commented. “Even one or two dead bodies found would be suspicious enough, don’t you think?”

Lan Qiren paused to ponder for a second. What Wen Ruohan said was right. The Mo Family as he recalled had very quickly called for Gusu Lan’s help when there was a disturbance in their village, even though there had yet to be a casualty. Huanying Village waited until ten bodies were discovered to ask for help.

“It’s a lot easier to notice something’s wrong when you live in a small community. If one of your family members were suddenly found mysteriously dead, wouldn’t you badger the village chief nonstop?” Wen Ruohan added. “I don’t see anyone yelling at the village chief, though nobody I’ve talked to so far seems fond of him.”

“... You think the villagers themselves have something to do with this,” Lan Qiren said. Or maybe it was the village chief himself - he was apparently the only person knowledgeable enough about cultivators in the village, yet he was also the one who sent the request. Lan Qiren was not sure, after his last mistake of trusting Jin Guangyao and not believing in Wei Wuxian, he did not dare to make quick judgement on people’s character anymore.

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “I’m saying it’s weird. Do they not miss those ten people, to wait until now to call for help? Is there anything else that changed right before you were called?”

He wouldn't have a clue, he was unfortunately a little too confident since he had already encountered this before and left the task of interviewing the villagers to the other three. Lan Qiren bit his lower lip, pondering. “... Where is the nearest inn here?”

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. “Impatient already, young master? I’m fine with outdoors, brings a little more excitement-”

“Shameless!” He whacked the man on the head, uttering the word not too dissimilar to his future nephew.

Talking to the innkeeper lady, Lan Qiren discovered a clue he had missed before - or to be more accurate, never bothered investigating in his previous life. There was indeed another fishy occurrence that happened not long before the first body was discovered.

Roughly a month before the first body was found, there was a small stray goblin that had been stealing from their homes and killing their farm animals. Coincidentally, there was a rogue cultivator who just happened to be stopping by the village in his travels. Hearing about the goblin, he offered to help the villagers in exchange for food and lodging. As promised, the rogue cultivator indeed captured and exterminated the creature.

He was never seen leaving the village. A month later, the body of a young teenage girl who was trying to pick some lotus pods was found by the lake. Some people theorized that the rogue cultivator had died and his spirit was haunting the village, but the chief had dismissed those assumptions, telling them that not only the cultivator had already left very early in the morning while everyone hadn't risen yet, cultivators had undergone special rituals so they would not return as ghosts even if they died.

“Does anyone remember what this rogue cultivator looked like? What is his name and what did he wear?” Lan Qiren asked.

“The village chief would know. I only remember that he was a handsome young lad,” said the innkeeper lady. She glanced at Wen Ruohan and frowned. “If I have to describe him... I'd say he has some resemblance to this young master here.”

Both Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan were a little surprised. They glanced at each other.

Leaving the inn, Lan Qiren grabbed Wen Ruohan by the front of his robes and dragged him to the back of the inn. He glared at him. “Do you know something else?”

Wen Ruohan smirked and placed his palm over Lan Qiren's hand. "Be calm. My looks may be one in ten million but a man who looks like me may not necessarily have anything to do with me."

"I find it already suspicious enough that you're all over the place without any subordinates. Aren't you the heir to Qishan Wen?"

"Which means I'm strong enough to travel on my own. If young master wants to know more about me, you're welcomed to come join me-"

"Forget it. I'll question you later," Lan Qiren huffed. "For now, let's go and see the village chief."

Wen Ruohan hummed as the two of them walked together, heading to see the village chief. "Do you think the cultivator ever left the village?"

"If he didn't, where would he be?"

"Still inside, where else? Though, who knows if it's only his soul or his body."

"..." Lan Qiren decided to not voice his assumptions, even though what they were both thinking was likely the same. Someone who was seen coming in but never came out, what else could have happened? Moreover, a malicious spirit appeared right after the incident?

... He was secretly a little ashamed that he never cared to investigate or took notice of things like this before. In the past all he thought about was the solution and never trying to understand the real cause, everything he did was following set rules and instructions from textbooks. It was always liberate, suppress, eliminate. A ghost with longings? Liberate it. A devious demon? Suppress or eliminate it.

Lan Qiren's steps halted when he noticed a familiar figure standing by the lake on their way to the village chief's house. The lake was also another source of water for the villagers and the place where the first victim was found. He frowned. "Young Master Wei?"

Wei Changze turned around and smiled. "Young Master Lan. Have you found anything?"

"You could say so. What are you doing here?" Asked Lan Qiren as he walked closer to Wei Changze, also observing the lake. Wen Ruohan followed after him wordlessly.

"Chasing after traces of demonic energy. I noticed the lake is not as clear and thought I might find something..." Wei Changze paused and his gaze fell on the young man in red robes behind Lan Qiren.

"Wen Ruohan of Qishan Wen," Wen Ruohan introduced himself.

Wei Changze smiled politely. "Wei Changze of Yunmeng Jiang. I see, you're the one Young Master Lan has been talking about lately."

"Ehem," Lan Qiren uncharacteristically cleared his throat very loudly to stop Wei Changze from talking.

Unfortunately Wen Ruohan already had a smug smile forming on his face. "I'm flattered to know that the young master thinks about me a lot. I too, can't take him off my mind ever since our first encounter."

"Speaking nonsense. What have you found here?" Lan Qiren diverted the topic before they strayed further from their original intention.

"The level of resentful energy here is a lot higher compared to other places. Fengmian was with me earlier and he also agreed that it's almost similar to the water demons we've fought in Yunmeng before. Somebody has definitely either drowned in this lake before or had their body dumped here."

Lan Qiren's eyes widened. He proceeded to tell Wei Changze about the case of the missing cultivator and their suspicions. Since the body of the first victim was retrieved, if there was indeed a body inside it could be the missing rogue inside.

Wen Ruohan hummed. "I heard the Lan Clan has the unique ability to speak to the deceased. Can you do it here, young master, and ask about the victim?"

The two men stood at the back as Lan Qiren sat down and took out his guqin. In the past, even at this age he had already mastered Inquiry and was just as good as Lan Wangji. He strummed through several notes before sensing the presence of the spirit and proceeded to ask it the first question.

He frowned when the spirit sent its reply.

Wen Ruohan exhaled. Since there was a reply, that meant there was indeed a spirit here.

"What did you ask and what does it say?" Wei Changze asked.

"I asked if there was a dead body in the water, as well as their gender and age. There is a male, twenty years old. Whether or not he died in the lake is unknown," Lan Qiren relayed. Which meant the spirit was not the first victim but likely the missing rogue, since the first victim was a younger female.

"It's possible that he has been killed and dumped into the lake then," said Wei Changze. "Ask if he remembers who killed him."

Lan Qiren played some more. The spirit responded and this time very aggressively that even Lan Qiren flinched from the force. It was likely very furious - not unusual for a spirit unjustly murdered.

“... A female... no.... male?” Lan Qiren narrowed his eyes. “He said... it’s the woman’s fault that the man killed him.”

Wen Ruohan drummed his fingers. His expression had darkened. “... Ask it, were the two people the village chief and his wife?”

Wei Changze looked a little stunned at how straightforward Wen Ruohan was. He glanced back at Lan Qiren, who did just as suggested. He took in the way Lan Qiren’s expression had also darkened. Lan Qiren remained silent for a while and finally nodded, confirming the Qishan Wen heir’s suspicion. Wen Ruohan exhaled.

“This lake is connected to the river we went to earlier, where most villagers obtained their source of water from. I see the connection now,” said Wen Ruohan.

“What do you mean?” Asked Lan Qiren.

“When the spirit first appeared to me and took my form, I was staring into the water washing my face,” Wen Ruohan answered.

Wei Changze finally understood. “It is likely a demon originating from the resentful spirit who died in the water. A fragment is left and bound here while the other fragment has cultivated into a malicious demon that continues to take in energy from living humans to grow. It takes in the appearance of the victims through their reflection in the water,” he said.

Realization struck Lan Qiren as well. Three of the victims were found by the river. Now that he thought about it, the other victims were also found near other bodies of water - the lake, the well at their houses, bath tubs. Nobody thought it was weird because washing, bathing, fetching water - they were all part of daily activities. However, all of those villagers used water from the same source - the river that was also connected to this lake.

“It’s a small village, with barely any resources and most of them are uneducated. The village chief manages everything and holds the power. If he committed a crime, it is no wonder that he wants to hide it and nobody else dares to confront him. It’s only when he becomes afraid

of death more than getting captured, that he finally decided to call for help,” Wen Ruohan concluded.

“... So are we still going to see the village chief now and make him confess?” Lan Qiren questioned. “We have limited time and to resolve the spirit’s grudge we might have to punish the murderer. We have to suppress it.”

“Limited time?” Wei Changze asked.

“The young master and I have been cursed,” Wen Ruohan explained. “We both encountered my doppelganger while at the river.”

Wei Changze hummed. “I see. That means the spirit might be coming after you two next, since he has marked the two of you.”

“Marked?” Lan Qiren repeated.

“All the victims saw their doppelgangers - that was when they were marked, or cursed, to be more accurate, I suppose. The spirit was able to slowly drain their life forces due to the curse but to actually complete the curse and obtain the energy for itself, I’m theorizing that it needed to be close to the victims themselves again - which explains why all of the victims were found close to a body of water that came from the river,” said Wei Changze.

“And it has to be a large enough amount,” Lan Qiren thought out loud. “At least the size of a bathtub. Almost enough to submerge a person.”

“... We might actually be able to lure out the spirit then,” Wei Changze said.

“How?” Lan Qiren asked.

“The two of you should get in a bathtub.”

“...” Is there a rule against murdering a guest disciple outside of Cloud Recess?

Patience is virtue, Lan Qiren. Remember, you are doing this for the sake of the innocent villagers. Think of the young children, the people who have nothing to do with the murder ,
Lan Qiren tried to console himself.

It did not work when the person in front of him had such an annoying, triumphant smirk that made him want to punch the wall so bad.

Lan Qiren wanted to use the classic way of just cleansing the area to solve the case - but both Wen Ruohan and Wei Changze (that scheming traitor) agreed that it was a waste of time and energy. They eventually went to the inn and asked for a large bathtub instead. The inn workers filled it with water from the river and since Lan Qiren did not bring an extra change of clothes with him (he thought it would be just a short mission, dammit!) he was forced to strip down to his inner robes and sat in the bathtub with the future enemy.

What a great day, indeed. All of this could have been prevented if only he had insisted on sticking to his original plan that worked just well in his previous life. The only downside to his plan in the previous life would be that the village chief and his wife's crime would have forever been buried. Oh well, at least the poor soul who died would get some justice. Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian were there at the village chief's house, probably grilling the old man for answers now. Lan Qiren was sure with Nie Yizhou's death glare and thunderous temper the old man and his wife would be confessing their crime within five minutes.

Wei Changze, this closet gremlin on the other hand, was waiting outside their room, probably here just to initiate his dastardly plan of getting Lan Qiren together with Wen Ruohan. It wasn't working, definitely wasn't working, because as time passed all Lan Qiren could feel for the Qishan Wen future leader was loathing.

Why the hell was he stripping down to only his underpants?! He had been travelling all over from cities to cities, surely he had plenty of extra change of robes with him! He didn't need to worry about going home wet, Qishan wasn't that far from Huanying Village either.

“Ah, never have I thought I would ever be granted the blessings to bathe with Young Master Lan,” Wen Ruohan smirked. “Though I must say, isn’t that robe stuffy? We are both men, why didn’t you just take it off?”

“... We are both men, why didn’t you just take everything off either?” Lan Qiren said wryly.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow and lifted his body a little. “If you wish-”

“Stop, no,” Lan Qiren quickly said.

Wen Ruohan chuckled and sat back. “Reminds me of that night in Caiyi Town.”

Lan Qiren frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You do some interesting things when you’re drunk.”

Lan Qiren paled. What did he do? Did he do anything to embarrass himself or Gusu Lan?

However, before he could ask further, Lan Qiren sensed the presence of resentful energy surrounding him. The water surface rippled and soon they could feel whatever little amount was left of their remaining spiritual energy was being sucked out at a faster rate.

“It’s here,” said Wen Ruohan. “Get ready.”

As soon as the figure appeared - still in the appearance of Wen Ruohan - the real Wen Ruohan tapped on the array they had set up and activated the trap they had readied to capture the spirit. Wei Changze barged into the room and hurled another talisman at the doppelganger. The doppelganger ghastly screamed. It clawed at Wen Ruohan trying to suck out his spiritual energy to free itself from the array but the Qishan Wen heir quickly blocked

his own meridian. It angrily blasted him off in a wave of furious retaliation and sent him flying. It was not hard enough to break the wall but it was hard enough to make him groan and shatter the bathtub to pieces.

“Young Master Lan!” Wei Changze shouted and tossed him the Spirit-Trapping Pouch.

Lan Qiren leaked a miniscule amount of his remaining spiritual energy to attract the doppelganger. The resentful spirit that just failed to suck off Wen Ruohan’s energy immediately decided to change its target, lured by its second prey, and lunged towards Lan Qiren. Lan Qiren gritted his teeth and also blocked his own meridians right at the very moment just before the spirit reached him. The spirit let out one unpleasant howl before it was successfully contained in the pouch. It bounced around aggressively before Wei Changze plastered another talisman to double seal it.

The wave of resentful energy finally halted. Lan Qiren slumped down from exhaustion and unsealed his meridians back. Even with it unsealed, he was still very drained. Unlike in his previous life, this time the spirit managed to curse both him and Wen Ruohan, two fairly talented cultivators on their own and had gathered even more energy, hence even harder to handle.

Wei Changze smiled. “Good job, the two of you. You two might want to get some rest. Even though we have captured the demon, we may still need to cleanse the lake and the river.”

“Tomorrow, I can barely move,” Wen Ruohan whined.

“Who asks you to help?” Lan Qiren retorted. “Young Master Nie and Young Master Jiang are here, you can get lost.”

“We still need to fly back to Gusu later, unless Young Master Lan doesn't mind me carrying him,” Wei Changze reminded him.

“... We’ll spend the night here,” Lan Qiren relented.

“And apologize for the bathtub, I suppose,” Wei Changze added.

Wei Changze only had some splashes of water on his robes but the other two young men were thoroughly soaked. Both of them dried themselves and Lan Qiren was thankful for Gusu Lan’s multi-layered robes, otherwise it would feel so weird to be wearing an outer robe without any inner one. The three of them went downstairs to apologize to the innkeeper and pay for the damages.

The innkeeper lady stared silently at the broken bathtub. She sighed and shook her head. “Youngsters these days are so rough.”

“We are terribly sorry, ma’am. We were too rough, we will pay for the damages,” Wei Changze apologized.

The innkeeper lady laughed. “It’s fine as long as you’re compensating. It’s not often that I get to have fun stories to share with my customers.”

“...?”

She smiled playfully. “Still, I didn’t know you cultivators are this wild. You don’t engage in normal plays, you even have three people in the tub huh?”

“....”

Lan Qiren nearly suffered from a qi deviation that night.

The body in the lake

Chapter Notes

Forgive me for any inaccuracies

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The following morning when Lan Qiren woke up, most of his spiritual energy had already replenished. He glanced at Wen Ruohan, who was sprawled right next to him ungracefully. How dare this brute climbed into his bed while he was asleep, moreover laying down half-naked again. Still, he pressed a finger against Wen Ruohan's wrist to check on his condition and discovered that the man too had recovered from the temporary energy drain.

Wei Changze who had accustomed to Cloud Recess's rule of waking up at five had just woken up. He stretched his body and upon seeing Lan Qiren approached his classmate. "How is your body? You should rest more, you need to recover your energy."

"I'm fine. It's almost returned to normal level," said Lan Qiren. He glanced briefly at the still snoring figure in the bed. "More importantly, I have something I didn't get to tell you yesterday."

"What is it?" Asked Wei Changze.

Lan Qiren pulled his classmate a little further away just in case Wen Ruohan might hear them. "He already has it. The Yin Iron," he whispered.

Wei Changze's eyes widened. He stared at Lan Qiren. "Are you certain?"

Lan Qiren nodded. "He stole it from his father, the current Sect Leader Wen now."

".... How?"

“How the Sect Leader Wen obtained it? I don’t know,” said Lan Qiren. “One thing for sure is that he already has one, though I don’t think he has ever used it yet.”

“Do you think he’s running away from Sect Leader Wen now? That explains why he is wandering from cities to cities and sleeping in cheap inns,” Wei Changze said.

“If he doesn’t want to be discovered shouldn’t he at least wear a different robe or put on disguise? I don’t know,” Lan Qiren said.

“What about the rest of the Yin Iron pieces?”

Lan Qiren frowned. He tried to recall the locations of the rest of the Yin Iron pieces, based on the faint memories of Lan Wangji reporting all his discoveries throughout his journey with Wei Wuxian. Wen Ruohan had three pieces of them - one taken from Tianyi Temple in Dafan Mountain, another obtained by Wen Chao from the Florist Lady, while the third one was taken from Cloud Recess. The fourth piece was kept by Xue Yang, who at this time wasn’t even born yet, while the fifth was accidentally discovered by Wei Wuxian in the Xuanwu Cave.

“He won’t find them in the nearest time. In the future he will have three pieces and two of them were obtained by his subordinates,” said Lan Qiren. The man had always left the dirty jobs to his sons and niece. He remembered he even sent his healer niece and nephew to Cloud Recess to look for the piece.

Lan Qiren frowned. Something was not quite right. The first piece was supposedly retrieved by Wen Ruohan from Dafan Mountain but why did he already have it with him? Moreover, he even claimed that he had stolen it from his father. There were only five pieces of the Yin Iron.

“Young Master Lan?”

“My memory is a little fuzzy. Let me try and recall it,” said Lan Qiren.

Wei Changze nodded. “Don’t force yourself. Like you said, he won’t find them in the nearest time. Maybe he won’t even find them, ever, in fact.”

“Really?” Lan Qiren wondered why Wei Changze was confident about that.

“At the rate you’re going it doesn’t look like he will be able to be with a woman anytime soon-”

Lan Qiren whacked the young man.

They met up again with Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian that morning after breakfast. The two were admittedly surprised to see a new addition to their group but did not question neither Lan Qiren nor Wei Changze much, though Nie Yizhou did look wary. While Lan Qiren, Wen Ruohan, and Wei Changze captured the doppelganger, Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian had already plastered purifying talismans at the river. They were only waiting for Lan Qiren to finish up cleansing the lakewater, which had the highest pollution of resentful energy.

“Is it possible to take out the dead body in the lake?” Nie Yizhou asked.

Jiang Fengmian observed the lake to estimate the depth of the water. “We might be able to do it but at this point of time, the body likely has decomposed into a skeleton already. We might as well just hold a burial here to soothe the fragment of spirit left.”

“I don’t think it can be soothed anymore, considering it has developed enough resentment to create a demon. If you only suppress it, isn’t it possible for it to get stronger again?” Wei Changze asked.

“Then, let’s just fish out whatever we can, how about that?” Nie Yizhou asked.

Lan Qiren sat down and began thinking. Taking out the remains and burying or cremating them properly would be the safest way to ensure the spirit would never reemerge. However, it was impractical and Jiang Fengmian's suggestion to hold a simple funeral at the lake to honour the dead was more efficient and practical. They already sealed the demon that terrorized the village anyway and whatever was left there would be gone after they cleanse it away.

"We can also put up wards around this area, how about that?" Jiang Fengmian suggested.

"Temporarily it would be good. In the long term, will it be effective?" Wei Changze questioned.

"You have already captured the spirit. The spirit is too weak to even have its own form after months, it wouldn't be possible to come back, don't you think?"

"But the reason the spirit hasn't been able to cultivate to be strong enough is because it has only devoured ten victims. What if some remnant is left and it moves to a different place that we don't know to collect more victims?" Wei Changze pointed. "We can't block the river or stop people from coming to the lake, it's their water source."

Lan Qiren froze for a second. His mind replayed his thoughts from the previous day. Huanying Village was not far from Qishan. The river... was it connected to any waterway in Qishan?

Jiang Fengmian frowned. "I suppose you're right. It would be terrible if it stays and goes unnoticed for years."

It could become even stronger. It could pull in more victims and collect more resentful energy. In ten to twenty years, it could eventually form a waterborne abyss.

Lan Qiren's hands trembled and he clenched his fists. Was he actually mistaken when he thought he had successfully suppressed the spirit before? Could it be that... because he never

did actually capture the demon or properly eradicate it, the doppelganger had developed into a stronger demon? Was it possible that instead of being suppressed, the spirit was able to flee to Qishan and developed even more resentment, cultivated and formed into a waterborne abyss?

The same waterborne abyss that appeared in Biling Lake, that Wangji, Xichen, and Wuxian fought? Was the waterborne abyss his fault?

"What do you think, young master?" Wen Ruohan's question broke him out of his trance.

Lan Qiren bit his lower lip. "Search for the remains. Bury it, and cleanse this place thoroughly."

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. "Really, young master? I thought you'd want to go home quickly."

"We must not take a short route at the possible expense of others' safety. We are cultivators, for the sake of the people a little hardship is not to be questioned," Lan Qiren said. He was truly ashamed of himself, to have taken the textbook teachings to heart without thinking about it himself, to have picked the easy way for himself without considering how it may harm someone else.

There was no such thing as a perfect path, a perfect life, or a perfect person. Lan Qiren could not believe that within one day, he had discovered how flawed he was in the past. Above all, he was met with this revelation because of the future enemy, as well as the future father of the youth he used to berate so much. So much for being the famed, peerless teacher, he was already a failure as a cultivator.

"Young Master Lan is truly a man who embodies virtues of a righteous cultivator perfectly. I'm learning a lot," Wen Ruohan smirked.

Whether or not he was just teasing, Lan Qiren had no idea but the praise hurt him even more. What he was doing was rectifying the mistake he had made in his previous life. Then again, what if the demon was meant to exist? What if by eliminating it early on, someone who

should never exist would exist, and in turn may cause the demise of someone else? What about the future?

... *Weighing in people's life is not my right*, Lan Qiren decides. He shouldn't just pick which life to save, not when the future was uncertain at this point. He should try to save as many people as he can. He couldn't be sure if this was truly the origin of that waterborne abyss anyway. It was still possible that he did eliminate the spirit completely in his past life, he wasn't going to bet on uncertainties.

That said, Jiang Fengmian who was the expert in handling water demons and fishing hovered over the lake on his sword to look for the remains. With the help of a long pole and a fishing net, they were able to fish out whatever was left of the poor cultivator as much as they could.

The body had already decomposed, leaving only the skeletons, bits and pieces of the muscle tissue as well as the hair and nails. They found several pieces of rocks stuffed inside the poor man's plain brown robes that was used to prevent his body from floating, as well as a hole on the back of his clothes that was an obvious sign of stabbing.

Lan Qiren finally understood why the spirit mentioned it was the wife's fault that the village chief killed him. Jiang Fengmian told them that after a rough interrogation by Nie Yizhou the day before, the village chief finally confessed that on the night after the goblin was captured, the village chief invited the rogue cultivator for a feast to thank him.

The young wife of the village chief unfortunately had fallen for the rogue's good looks and seduced him. She flirted with the man and in the fit of his anger added with his drunkenness, the village chief stabbed the rogue. Afraid of his crime being discovered, the couple carried the dead body and threw it into the lake at midnight to hide the body. They truly did not expect that the man would come back to haunt the whole village.

"Poor guy helped them and that's what he got," Nie Yizhou commented distastefully.
"Ungrateful bunch, those two."

Wen Ruohan hummed. "The rogue probably wasn't such a great guy either. He chooses to kill random villagers instead of directly targeting his murderer. Not that innocent, I'd say."

Nie Yizhou glared at him. "I was trying to console you but it seems unneeded," he said and tossed something at Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan fell silent. Lan Qiren narrowed his eyes.

The object that Nie Yizhou had just tossed, found in the dead man's pouch, seemed to be an entrance token with Qishan Wen's sun engraved on it.

It was just as Lan Qiren suspected. The dead man wasn't a rogue but was a member of Qishan Wen. Wen Ruohan too, definitely wasn't just wandering around or night hunting alone for fun. He was traveling for a reason.

Wen Ruohan shrugged. "Let's bury him."

"You're not going to bring him back to Qishan? This man is one of yours!" Nie Yizhou jerked.

"He wasn't wearing the Qishan Wen robes, he didn't give his name to the villagers, he probably doesn't want to return to Qishan," answered Wen Ruohan.

Lan Qiren stared at Wen Ruohan. "You know him, don't you?"

"I can't possibly identify someone already in this state-"

"The innkeeper lady mentioned he resembles you. You must know this person."

"It's none of your business," Wen Ruohan coldly replied, much to Lan Qiren's surprise. "Whether I know him or not, it's not important. Let's get him buried and settle this."

"... Fine," Lan Qiren seethed.

Lan Qiren sat down to cleanse the area while Jiang Fengmian, Nie Yizhou, and Wei Changze proceeded with a simple burial. They left the punishment of the crime to the local magistrate. Since Wen Ruohan refused to acknowledge the victim as his clan member, it would not be treated as matters of the cultivation world.

Lan Qiren still could not help wondering what the man was thinking. He stole a glance at Wen Ruohan, noting the slightly trembling hand clutching the token hard.

Nie Yizhou yawned. "I didn't get to battle any demon at all but why is it so tiring?"

"For you, restraining yourself from beating up the village chief must be harder than battling demons," Jiang Fengmian teased.

Nie Yizhou laughed. "You're right. Should we stop by Caiyi Town before returning to Cloud Recess?" He paused and glanced at Wen Ruohan. "What about Young Master Wen?"

Wen Ruohan had been silent ever since the body was discovered. He gripped on the hilt of his sword harder. "I have a place to go."

Wei Changze observed silently. He then pulled Lan Qiren a little closer. "Young Master Lan, why don't you follow him?" He whispered.

Lan Qiren frowned. "Why?"

"It's suspicious, isn't it?"

Indeed, it was suspicious. However, if Wen Ruohan refused to talk, what could Lan Qiren do?

"He might talk if you ask nicely," Wei Changze said.

Lan Qiren rolled his eyes. "When has that actually worked?"

"Plenty of times for me."

That was because Wei Changze himself was pleasant-looking, with a soft demeanor and good temperament. His speech was polite and he was amicable. Except for the time when his inner gremlin took over. That was when he became more dangerous than Cangse Sanren.

"He has been flirting with you nonstop and now he suddenly acts cold. Isn't that strange? I think you should watch him, or at least find out why he has been travelling."

It might just be yet another ploy from Wei Changze but Lan Qiren had to admit he had a point. Gritting his teeth, he looked at Wen Ruohan. "If you don't mind, please let me come with you."

Wen Ruohan looked stunned. "Why?"

"... I promised to buy you drinks, didn't I?" Lan Qiren gave an excuse.

A smile finally curved up Wen Ruohan's face. "Well, if Young Master Lan insists, how can I refuse such beauty. For a start, how about telling me your name?"

They parted ways - Nie Yizhou, Jiang Fengmian, and Wei Changze heading back to Gusu, with some plans to stop by and get some meals, while Lan Qiren followed Wen Ruohan to wherever the man was planning to go.

He never thought he would have to do this. Damn it. Wei Changze promised to inform Qingheng Jun about his little unexpected trip. Lan Qiren just hoped the young man would not utter anything unnecessary to Qingheng Jun. He had trust that Wei Changze at least would respect the Cloud Recess rules unlike his future son.

“So where are we going?” Lan Qiren asked, walking a little faster to match Wen Ruohan’s pace.

“Have you ever been to Dafan Mountain?”

Lan Qiren personally had not been to Dafan Mountain but if he recalled it right, both Wangji and Wei Wuxian had been there. The junior disciples too were there on a night hunt. The Dafan Mountain was originally occupied by a subgroup of the Wen Clan, where Wen Qing and the Ghost General Wen Qionglin came from. Since Lan Sizhui was also related to them, his parents should also originate from the place.

Traveling from Huanying Village to Dafan Mountain took them half a day on their swords. The two young cultivators stopped midway to take a break. They had just recovered from a spiritual energy drain and Lan Qiren had spent some more cleansing the lake. He sat down on top of the flatland to relax and meditate, refusing the steamed bun that Wen Ruohan offered him.

“You’re not hungry?” Wen Ruohan asked.

“There's only one bun, you eat it,” Lan Qiren replied.

“You can eat the bun and I’ll eat the fillings.”

Wouldn't people normally offer half? “Ridiculous, are you a child? I can go for a few hours without eating,” Lan Qiren huffed. His current cultivation was not as polished as it was in his previous life but fasting was something he was capable of doing. Most importantly, he was not going to eat whatever Wen Ruohan offered him.

Wen Ruohan shrugged and popped the bun into his mouth. “Your loss.”

Lan Qiren grimaced. He turned his head away. “... You really are strange. Did you run away from home? I would never expect someone like you to travel alone, staying in cheap inns, buying cheap street food, and now sleeping outside like this.”

Wen Ruohan laughed. “Just where the hell did you get that idea about me, hmm? Ah well, I would think Gusu Lan disciples won’t be sitting here dirtying their pristine white robes, but here you are with me.”

“... What would you do if you’re able to manipulate the Yin Iron?” Lan Qiren asked.

Wen Ruohan poked at the fire with a twig. “Nothing, really. Just thought it’d be fun.”

“You don’t intend to take over other sects, do you?” Lan Qiren dared himself to ask.

Wen Ruohan burst out laughing. “I could barely take care of my own sect, how am I supposed to mind about other sects? But, ah, I suppose some people can be ambitious. Like my father.”

“What about your father?”

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “He talks about setting the standard for every sect - ridiculous, I know. We all have different cultivation methods - Gusu Lan with their music and Qinghe Nie with their sabres.”

That did not make sense. The Yin Iron - Lan Qiren could not say he had extensive knowledge about it, but according to Wei Wuxian who did some decent amount of research on it and even created the Stygian Tiger Amulet, the object could amplify their negative emotions but could not possibly just change their core principles. It was ultimately a relic, not a demon and it could not possess someone to completely influence their decisions.

If Wen Ruohan had zero intention of dominating other sects, then why would he initiate the war, the cruelty? There ought to be a reason. Or... of course, the man could be just fucking lying. People change, once Wen Ruohan tasted power it wasn't unthinkable that he suddenly desired more.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Am I so handsome that you can't take my eyes off me?" Wen Ruohan teased.

"I'm curious about what's in your head," Lan Qiren said.

Wen Ruohan grinned flirtatiously. "You, of course."

"Fool around once more and I'll place a Silencing Charm on you," Lan Qiren threatened.

"An abuse of power, Lan Qiren," Wen Ruohan smirked. He hummed. "I really like your name. *Benevolence*, huh. You don't show benevolence to me, though. What about your birth name?"

In Lan Qiren's experience, two young men who were not originally close calling each other by their birth names was the start of a romance. Or at least that was what happened with his nephew and nephew-in-law. He shuddered. "Not telling."

"Come on, aren't we friends now?"

"Not friends."

“More than friends then? We’ve seen each other wet and half naked...”

“.... Shameless...!!!”

Jiang Fengmian handed the scroll with the report of the case to Qingheng Jun. Qingheng Jun nodded and thanked them. His eyes scanned the three disciples briefly, noticing the absence of his younger brother. “Where is Qiren?”

“Young Master Lan wishes to accompany a friend for a short trip. He asks to relay this to you,” Jiang Fengmian said.

Qingheng Jun was surprised. “Qiren has a friend? Who?”

Nie Yizhou snickered a little. Wei Changze answered, “The heir of Qishan Wen, Wen Ruohan.”

Qingheng Jun was not on a friendly term with Wen Ruohan but he was briefly acquainted with him. Wen Ruohan never came to study in Gusu but they did meet several times at Discussion Conferences. Which now made him feel puzzled - when did Lan Qiren start getting acquainted with the man? Lan Qiren had only studied in Gusu and cultivated in seclusion half of the time. He had seen Wen Ruohan, sure, but they never talked. How in the world did they become friends?

Jiang Fengmian explained to him about their encounter with Wen Ruohan at Huanying Village and how the man had assisted them to capture the doppelganger. He also reported about the victim’s identity and Wen Ruohan’s strange refusal to bring the remains back to Qishan.

Qingheng Jun furrowed his eyebrows in worry. It was not widely known but from what he heard during the last Discussion Conference, it seemed like Sect Leader Wen was pitting his successors among themselves. He intended to have the strongest among his sons and nephews to inherit the position of the Sect Leader, and Sect Leader Nie kept insisting that Sect Leader Wen may have something up his sleeve that he was hiding from the world.

Could the rogue be one of Wen Ruohan's siblings or cousins, hence his refusal to bring the remains back? That made less sense, a dead man was a dead man, he wouldn't be a rival anymore. His death wasn't even caused by Wen Ruohan, why would he refuse to bring the remains back?

"Qingheng Jun, is there something wrong?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

Qingheng Jun shook his head and smiled. "Nothing. The three of you did a good job, you may go now."

"If you need help..." Jiang Fengmian offered.

"It's fine, Young Master Jiang. I'll be excusing myself first, I think my guests are about to arrive," said Qingheng Jun.

"Guests?"

"Ah, some new guest disciples are coming today," Qingheng Jun said. He blinked. "There they are."

The three young men turned around.

Jiang Fengmian's eyes widened.

Wei Changze held his breath.

Five youths - three men and two ladies were walking towards them. They respectfully greeted Qingheng Jun.

Jiang Fengmian's eyes fell on one of the female cultivators. She appeared to be around the same age as him, perhaps only one of two years younger. Her grey eyes were round and bright. Her long silky black hair was tied in a simple hairdo, adorned with only a single red ribbon. Her white and grey robes had some traces of dirt and looked cheap but nevertheless, she was still breathtakingly beautiful.

She smiled at Qingheng Jun. "This one is the disciple of Baoshan Sanren, Liang Xingxiu. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to come here, Qingheng Jun."

Jiang Fengmian nudged Wei Changze lightly. "A disciple of the legendary Baoshan Sanren, who'd expect. Isn't she so pretty?" He whispered and continued to look at her with admiration.

Wei Changze smiled.

He silently swallowed hard.

This was his future wife. He was pretty sure Lan Qiren had mentioned he was going to marry someone by the name of Liang Xingxiu - soon to be known as Cangse Sanren, and have a son with her.

Then why would his best friend appear to be besotted at her?

Chapter End Notes

EDIT:

After reading, "Cangse Sanren" is in fact only a title, real name never revealed TvT so I gave her a name.

Dafan Wen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Changze was feeling conflicted. He could hardly stay focused in class.

Mainly because one Cangse Sanren was asking endless questions to the teacher, who by now looked like he was at the end of his wits. Had it been someone like Lan Qiren teaching in front, he would probably have thrown her out of the classroom already. This particular teacher was not as strong-willed as the other elderly Lans. An outsider watching this would think that the girl was bullying her own teacher.

“Why is learning about clan genealogy and history so important? Am I going to use any of these in night hunts? Between knowing who invented the ink and knowing how to make use of the ink, isn’t the latter more important?” Cangse Sanren questioned.

“Maiden Liang, both are just as important. Learning history is an important part of a cultivator’s education,” said Teacher Lan.

Cangse Sanren pouted and twirled her brush.

Wei Changze’s eyes twitched a little. He raised his hand. “Teacher Lan, if I may interrupt. Maiden Liang,” he said.

Cangse Sanren turned to look at him, puzzled. Wei Changze could hear Jiang Fengmian’s low surprised hum. He was not usually the type to interrupt a discussion or even start one. Wei Changze himself could not recall anytime he spoke in class other than to answer any questions directed at him. However, he could not help feeling bothered throughout the whole lesson.

Wei Changze raised his brush and showed it to her. “Do you know what this is?”

Cangse Sanren raised an eyebrow. “A brush, obviously.”

“So you know the name. Do you need to know it, to be able to use it, though?” Wei Changze placed his brush back down. “You don’t. However, it certainly is easier to say that you need a brush, rather than saying you need a utensil made of long stick with hair dipped in ink. A common knowledge makes an easier conversation. Knowing names is the basics of everything.”

“Oh? And what does learning about clan history and genealogy have to do with it?” She questioned.

“Each clan has a different style, different method, different upbringing. Teacher Lan is kind enough to go through the clan history so you’d have basic understanding of clan relations and why each clan has different sets of rules. Without knowing the origin of Gusu Lan’s founder and history, the rules would not make sense to you,” Wei Changze explained.

Teacher Lan looked like he could hug Wei Changze. “Thank you, Young Master Wei. That was brilliant.”

However, it did not seem like Cangse Sanren was accepting the explanation. “Even knowing the origin, I still think the rules are ridiculous. Who has the time to memorize and who has the patience to follow all these 2500 rules? Even a monk would keel over.”

Teacher Lan looked horrified. Jiang Fengmian and Nie Yizhou both exchanged amused looks and giggled. Only Wei Changze remained silent and appeared strangely cold. A cheeky smile formed on Cangse Sanren’s face and she ignored the elder’s rambling about how rude and disrespectful she was, and that she needed to be punished with copying the rules hundreds of times until she learned to respect them. She instead continued asking questions that the teacher could not answer. Wei Changze chose to remain silent for the rest of the lesson.

Class ended. Wei Changze picked up his tools and walked out. Cangse Sanren ran after him and playfully tapped his shoulder, to which he turned around and looked at her scandalously. They were strangers. Touching each other without necessity like that was improper. He wished to get away from her but since Jiang Fengmian had stopped walking, it would be rude of him as the Jiang Clan servant to walk before the young master.

“Sorry, but I don’t know your name so I can’t just call you,” Cangse Sanren grinned. “Ah, I can’t just say young master either, there are so many young masters here after all.”

“Does Maiden Liang have anything you need from me?” Wei Changze politely asked.

“You know my name but I don’t know yours,” she pointed. “Knowing names is the basics, right? Your words, not mine.”

Reluctantly he gave out his name, “Wei Changze of Yunmeng Jiang.”

Jiang Fengmian also took the opportunity to introduce himself. “Jiang Fengmian of Yunmeng Jiang. Maiden Liang, I heard you’re the disciple of the esteemed Immortal Master Baoshan Sanren?”

“Yup, that’s my master! I guess she really is famous - I didn’t know the extent of her fame, she picked me up when I was an orphaned kid and I just recently left the mountains,” she laughed.

“I’m curious to hear your stories,” Jiang Fengmian said.

“Oh, really? Well, we could talk over some drinks,” Cangse Sanren suggested with a playful smile. “Cloud Recess has only been serving bland food so far, no meat at all. I heard Caiyi Town has some good food and the infamous Emperor’s Smile.”

Wei Changze looked away. Of course there was no meat. Did she even read the rules? Did she not listen to Teacher Lan reading all the rules on her first day? However, it did not seem like Jiang Fengmian cared. He was so excited at the prospect of befriending Baoshan Sanren’s favoured disciple, excited at the prospect of getting to know this beautiful lady.

“What do you think, Changze?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

“Sounds lovely. Just remember to return before curfew, Fengmian,” Wei Changze answered flatly.

Jiang Fengmian frowned. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

“Maiden Liang is inviting you,” Wei Changze said.

Cangse Sanren frowned. She looked at him. “Ah? I’m inviting you, Young Master Wei. Why do you think I was asking for your name?”

“...”

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “Young Master Wei, have I done something to annoy you? Why do you look like you don’t even want to speak to me?”

Jiang Fengmian thought his friend was acting odd as well. Wei Changze was normally friendly and polite, even if he was not talkative. While he wouldn’t be the type to initiate a conversation, he was not the type to actively avoid people, let alone showing dislike. He was even able to keep a neutral, polite face in front of that Jin Guangshan. Did Lan Qiren rub off on him, maybe?

Wei Changze knew he was acting peculiar, of course. However, thinking about the future and looking at Jiang Fengmian, he could not help it.

Why would the future him find this woman attractive, enough to choose her over his best friend? Jiang Fengmian had been nothing but kind to him. He came in as an orphaned servant boy but Sect Leader Jiang saw his potential and allowed him to cultivate. Jiang Fengmian treated him like a brother despite his status. He would give up anything for Jiang Fengmian, he would never fight over a woman with his best friend.

Yet, this was the woman he would soon marry. So far he was seeing no redeeming qualities about her. She was loud, she was rude, she was improper. Her cultivation was high and her beauty was undeniable but Wei Changze was not the type to care about that. So what was so special about this person? Thinking about it made him feel conflicted that he refused to even look at her. He needed to ask Lan Qiren more details about this. Unfortunately, the latter was not around because he was busy doing something that should definitely be more prioritized than Wei Changze's future love life, and Wei Changze was feeling guilty that he even had the luxury to think about this.

Nie Yizhou appeared and raised his eyebrow at them, sensing the slightest hostility. "Oh, what is this? This might be the first time I see Young Master Wei disliking something, or someone."

"No such thing," Wei Changze denied.

"Changze does take some time to warm up to people. Don't worry, Maiden Liang," Jiang Fengmian added.

Nie Yizhou snorted. He could somehow see where the problem came from. Jiang Fengmian wasn't subtle in his interest with Cangse Sanren while Wei Changze was too determined in prioritizing the heir of Yunmeng Jiang over himself. "Well, here's your chance to remedy that. Teacher Lan asked me to relay to you that Maiden Liang is to be punished by copying the sect rules 300 times."

Cangse Sanren made a face. "All 2500 of them?! I have plans!"

"Too bad for you then. Young Master Wei, he also asks you to watch over her," Nie Yizhou said and slapped his classmate's back playfully.

Wei Changze looked stricken. "There are so many Lan disciples, why do I have to do it?"

"Most of the senior Lan disciples are out on a night hunt now. Usually Lan Qiren would be the one supervising all punishment but he's not around. Since you're his closest friend and the teacher's current favourite - you have to help out until he returns."

“ ”
...

Cangse Sanren's eyes lit up. She grinned and skipped over to Wei Changze. "Well, let's get to know each other more, shall we?"

Wei Changze wanted to facepalm so bad. Was this karma, perhaps?

Dafan Mountain was not as grim as Lan Qiren expected, albeit not as lively either. The mountain was blessed with many spiritual herbs growing around its vicinity, hence an ideal place for cultivators specializing in medicine, such as this particular subgroup of the Wen Clan. There were not many of them, around the size of a very small clan, but their houses looked well-built and the people appeared healthy.

Wen Ruohan greeted the leader of the subgroup, Wen Ruoyu. He was Wen Ruohan's cousin of the same generation and based on his facial features, Lan Qiren guessed that this man should be Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin's father.

"I haven't seen you since my wedding, Ruohan," Ruoyu said as his newlywed wife served them tea. "How have you been? Since when did you start making friends, with a Lan, nonetheless?"

Wen Ruohan grinned. "Well, my dearest cousin is married, I ought to look for someone as well," he said and winked at Lan Qiren.

Lan Qiren grimaced but Wen Ruoyu only burst out laughing. Anyway, it looked like the two were really close. Lan Qiren noticed how relaxed Wen Ruohan seemed to appear, and how his cousin played along with his jokes. The two men exchanged some news, talking about another cousin who just gave birth and another uncle who just gifted a jar of rare wine. Wen Ruohan's expression then changed as he fished out something from his pouch.

“Ruoyu,” Wen Ruohan paused, then took out an item and placed it on the table.

It was the token they had taken from the dead man’s remains. Wen Ruoyu stared at it long and hard. He picked it up, then shut his eyes. “... Where?”

Wen Ruohan nodded. “In Huanying Village. Unfortunately he was long dead. I got him buried there.”

“... How?” Wen Ruoyu asked, his voice a little choked up.

“Killed by the village chief,” Wen Ruohan said and briefly explained about what had occurred at the village that led to the man’s death. “I wouldn’t have found him if not because Gusu Lan sent their disciples. Any longer and his resentment would have bore a more dangerous demon.”

“... I see. Thank you, Young Master Lan,” said Wen Ruoyu, directing it to Lan Qiren.

Lan Qiren shook his head. “It was our duty to investigate. The villagers called for help.”

Wen Ruoyu smiled weakly. “Still, let me thank you. That guy... he was supposed to be our responsibility.”

So Wen Ruohan, this jerk, did know who it was. In fact, judging by the way he was talking to his cousin, it was almost as if he was expecting, or rather searching for the dead man - considering Wen Ruoyu could immediately guess who it was. Which brought up the question - if the rogue was someone close to them, why left him buried in a small village instead of bringing him back to Qishan, or maybe Dafan Mountain?

Wen Ruoyu picked up the token and placed it in his pouch. “I’ll hold on to this, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead. It’s better off with you and I was planning to leave it here anyway,” Wen Ruohan shrugged.

“... If only I had come to his assistance,” Wen Ruoyu bit his lip.

“We both know it’s not your fault. You’re a newlywed, my father would be wary of you if you suddenly leave your wife for a long trip or bring someone into your home.”

“It is my fault,” Wen Ruoyu insisted. “He wouldn’t have died if not because I suggested to...”

“Ruoyu, it wasn’t your fault and you know that. Whatever done is done and if you’re blaming someone, I’m also in this. Either way it’s not like we don’t expect that our doings will be without consequences. At least he no longer has to be caged in Nightless City,” Wen Ruohan spat.

Their conversation stopped when Wen Ruoyu’s wife called them for dinner. Since Lan Qiren was beginning to feel hungry now, he did not decline - it was a humble but hearty meal of hotpot with mountain-grown herbs and vegetables. Soon the sky was turning dark, so Wen Ruoyu offered a spare room for Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren to retire for the night. Lan Qiren would rather find somewhere else to stay, but they were in Dafan Mountain, where there were no inn or resthouse. Moreover, since Wen Ruoyu’s wife had already taken out and laid the spare beddings in the room, he could not refuse. She was a very sweet and gentle woman, it reminded Lan Qiren a bit of his grandnephew.

They lied down in silence. Lan Qiren was extremely curious about the dead rogue, but he thought it would be inappropriate. The man may have passed away months ago but to Wen Ruohan, he was only just aware of it. If the man was an important family member, he could have been hoping for his survival before. Fortunately by nine o'clock Lan Qiren’s biological clock kicked in and he dozed off.

He awoke to the sound of hushed voices and rustling leaves outside. Lan Qiren’s brows furrowed. He glanced to his right and noticed that the bedding was void of its occupant. Lan

Qiren was just about to get up and look for Wen Ruohan when he heard approaching footsteps. He quickly shut his eyes again.

“Thanks for the alcohol, Ruoyu. Uncle Four’s wine really is the best, almost as good as Emperor’s Smile,” Wen Ruohan’s voice said.

“Ah, Gusu’s infamous Emperor’s Smile, huh? I definitely have to visit one day. Speaking of it, this Young Master Lan...”

“I can trust him. Look at him, he actually fell asleep at nine. Where else do you see people who actually follow their sect rules completely like this? He truly is fascinating. I still can’t forget our first night together,” Wen Ruohan laughed.

“First night? Ruohan, you... stop using misleading words. I know you never cared about gender before but if you plan to become the next clan heir, don’t you need to marry a woman and have a child? A Gusu Lan disciple is not someone you can fool around with.”

“Our clan has so many talented seedlings, it’s not a concern. What use is siring children I can’t raise with a woman I don’t like? Look what happened to A Lin.”

Lan Qiren’s ears perked up at the mention of the new name. Could that be the dead rogue?

Wen Ruoyu’s voice was filled with grief and anger. “Ruohan... are you sure A Lin...”

“I’m certain, Ruoyu. You thought about it too, didn’t you? How was it possible for someone like A Lin, whose cultivation talent can rival us, to just die in the hands of middle-aged commoners? Someone screwed him over before he came to Huanying Village, I’m certain,” said Wen Ruohan.

“... Ruohan, you have to seal the Yin Iron,” Wen Ruoyu suddenly said. “Tomorrow, first thing in the morning, you must go to Tianyi Temple and seal that thing. That place should be good.”

“I plan to master this Yin Iron, Ruoyu. That way nobody, not even my father can use it.”

“You must be mad if you think you can do it. Nobody has ever done it and you can’t possibly do it within a short time. Sooner or later Uncle will realise that it wasn’t A Lin but you,” Wen Ruoyu hissed.

“Ruoyu, he got it out once and he’s gonna take it out again, even if we seal it. A Lin is dead, we can’t let this chance go to waste.”

“It’s because A Lin is dead that I don’t want you to also go. Please, Ruohan, let’s not risk your life for something uncertain. We need you to be the next clan leader,” Wen Ruoyu begged.

“.... Tssk. Fine. Only because you, my favourite cousin, asked me cutely.”

Wen Ruoyu laughed. “I wonder if it’s Young Master Lan asking you cutely, would you have not been so stubborn?”

“Ohh, if it’s my RenRen I’d happily throw this thing to be eaten by pigs.”

“... Let’s not do that, we don’t want a demon pig, hm?”

They chatted a bit more, then Wen Ruoyu finally left. Wen Ruohan yawned and stripped down to his pants as usual before getting to bed. However, instead of laying on the bedding a good five feet away from Lan Qiren’s own, he pulled it close to Lan Qiren, then lied down and draped one arm and a leg over Lan Qiren.

Lan Qiren froze. This... infuriating man! If he were to push him away, he would be revealing that he wasn’t asleep and had overheard the conversation. But... this... damn Wen Ruohan!

Lan Qiren tried to very gently push him away - only to gasp when Wen Ruohan pulled him into a tight embrace. His face instantly flushed red. "You - let go!"

"Eavesdropping is forbidden, right, Young Master Lan?"

"Who asks you to come and talk here? If you know I wasn't asleep why would you talk?"

Wen Ruohan laughed a little. "Even if he treats you courteously I can tell that Ruoyu doesn't trust you a bit. He wouldn't have talked if not because he's convinced you wouldn't listen."

"Then-"

"... Aren't you going to question me?" Wen Ruohan suddenly asked. His strong arms were still not letting go.

Lan Qiren shut his eyes, not willing to gaze at the man's bare chest. "Are you going to answer?"

Wen Ruohan laughed a little. He held his breath for a moment before he finally spoke, "You were right that I know him. I was sent out to look for him for months."

Lan Qiren frowned. "Why? What did he do?"

"Stole the Yin Iron."

Lan Qiren choked. He finally opened his eyes and looked at the Qishan Wen heir in disbelief. "You said you were the one who stole it!"

"It was a coordinated effort?" Wen Ruohan chuckled.

“Coordinated effort - what coordinated, one is on the run and the actual person stealing it is chasing him, how can you call it like that?” Lan Qiren gawked. “What about the one falsely accused of possessing it? He could never return!”

“Hey, it worked. Nobody except you and Ruoyu know that I have it. I’m surprised that you even know about the relic in fact, since even in Qishan Wen only my father and the potential heirs are aware of its existence,” Wen Ruohan laughed. There was a hint of bitterness in his laugh. “He wouldn’t want to come back to Qishan. He’d be happier dying somewhere else, though I wish he could have had a less painful one.”

Lan Qiren held his breath for a moment before he finally exhaled to calm himself. “Who was he?”

“... My brother.”

Chapter End Notes

I changed 3000 rules to 2500 rules, because...if WWX contributed to 1000, CSSR had to add something to that wall too LOL.

EDIT: Changed CSSR's name in the speech.

First love

Chapter Notes

So, looking back, if "Baoshan Sanren" is a title, then "Cangse Sanren" is definitely also a title (including Cangse, not just Sanren/Wanderer. I originally thought it might be Wanderer XX, but unless you're a non-human, it didn't make sense to not have surname in Chinese culture, since in SVSS even the slave Shen Jiu has a surname) and I've definitely made mistakes with the way the characters address her in their speech. Until I figure out how to address her properly, she's going to be referred as Maiden Cangse for now, and I'll probably go back and re-edit it later.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It was his brother.

The remains that they had just buried in Huanying Village, with an unmarked tombstone, wasn't just a normal rogue cultivator, wasn't just a normal Wen Clan member, but the brother of Wen Ruohan and therefore also the son of Qishan Wen Sect Leader.

It took almost all of Lan Qiren's effort to not scream at Wen Ruohan for how calm he was now considering his current situation. Lan Qiren wasn't the type to swear, but what the fuck. No matter how Qingheng Jun messed up - marrying someone unapproved, then secluding himself and leaving his children for Lan Qiren to raise - back when he died Lan Qiren had made sure to prepare a proper funeral for him despite Gusu Lan Sect still recovering from the fire at Cloud Recesses and in the middle of war. Wen Ruohan had just lost a brother but he chose to bury him like a stranger.

Though, judging from Wen Ruohan's words earlier, it wasn't out of malice. Lan Qiren knew Wen Ruohan had siblings, though none of them was really remarkable compared to him. Wen Ruohan had always stood out from the others due to his high level of cultivation, always the one in the limelight in every conference and competition that most people didn't really care about his siblings. His siblings were probably as memorable as Wen Chao's wife but this brother of his might be dear to him, since they even plotted stealing the Yin Iron together.

"Why?" Lan Qiren tried to keep his tone as neutral as possible. "He's your brother, why won't you bury him with the rest of the clan members?"

“He was my half-brother from my father’s one-night stand with a servant. He never had a good life in Nightless City, he hated that place. We weren’t particularly close too, but we share the same ideas as Ruoyu - that forcing a set standards on every sect was stupid,” Wen Ruohan shuffled a little and pressed Lan Qiren closer to him, almost like he was desperate to feel human warmth. “So when I found out about Yin Iron and its potential, we had this brilliant idea to steal and hide it.”

“... So you stole it and he acted as the distraction, am I right?” Lan Qiren asked.

“Brilliant, my RenRen.”

“Stop with the nickname. So burying him in an unmarked grave in a small village is - ”

“To prevent his remains from getting desecrated, yes. My father won’t care that it’s his own flesh and blood. The Yin Iron is more important. Not to mention he would realize the relic is not with my brother.”

Digging up his own child's remains for the sake of looking for an item sounded extremely preposterous but Lan Qiren wouldn't be surprised if someone who won't bat an eye after eliminating an entire clan were to do that. Something clicked in his mind.

Disrespecting the dead ones, being obsessed with power and adamant of making all the other clans bow down to him... were those things not what the future Wen Ruohan was? What changed his mind, to make him act almost exactly like the father he despised?

“Do you not feel guilty?” Lan Qiren blurted out before he realized how rude that was. Wen Ruohan’s brother might have left because they made him the bait but ultimately he didn’t die because of him. “Pardon me, I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“It’s okay. I was guilty of making him the scapegoat - I can't refute that. I thought... since he had wanted to leave Nightless City anyway, we could blame him and I could pretend that I

was chasing him, then fake his death so he can live peacefully,” Wen Ruohan uttered. “I didn’t think he’d actually die.”

“... Then, Wen Ruoyu...”

“Probably feeling guilty because he was the first one to bring up hiding and sealing the Yin Iron,” Lan Qiren shrugged. “I was thinking of learning how to master the relic so it would only obey me but Ruoyu keeps telling me that it’s dangerous.”

Well, Wen Ruoyu was certainly right because attempting to control the relic had backfired on all its users. Lan Qiren did not know what to say to all this new information. “So is your father still searching for the thing, not knowing that you have it?”

Wen Ruohan laughed, a sliver of bitterness hidden underneath. “Want to know the funnier thing? My father is pitting us - his sons and nephews - against each other. He’s offering the position of the next sect leader to whoever finds it. That’s how desperate he is.”

“.... What is your plan now?”

Wen Ruohan yawned. “Who knows. Now that I’m here, Ruoyu is definitely going to insist on sealing it. Dafan Mountain has a temple where people often pray, it has good energy,” Wen Ruohan said. He winked at Lan Qiren. “I can trust you to help me and keep the secret, right, RenRen?”

“Do not address me so familiarly.”

“Here I thought we’re getting closer,” Wen Ruohan sighed. “Well, I’m not too keen on sealing it but we’ll see if I’ll change my mind tomorrow. For now, let’s go to sleep.”

Lan Qiren pondered. If Wen Ruohan had sealed it here.... oh. Now it finally added up to why Wen Ruohan in his timeline retrieved the Yin Iron from this place, after Wen Qing and her

brother were born. It did not explain why he did that, though. He seemed so close to Wen Ruoyu, why would he suddenly change his mind and insisted on gathering all the pieces?

That thing needs to be destroyed, not sealed, Lan Qiren decided. However, if he could figure out how to destroy the Yin Iron, he would have done it in the past. Even Lan Yi couldn't do it. The prodigy Wei Wuxian died trying to destroy the Stygian Tiger Amulet.

"Ahh... it feels like a weight taken off my shoulders, being able to tell you my secret, Renren..." Wen Ruohan mumbled.

"Stop with the nicknames..." Lan Qiren paused, noticing that the man's hands were sneakily moving from his back down to his waist. "Scram!"

"Benevolence, Renren. Remember?"

"You shameless man!"

The conference took longer than Qingheng Jun expected. There were several newly established small clans introducing themselves and they did not forget to try sweet-talking major sect leaders. Qingheng Jun was half amazed and half disgusted by Sect Leader Yao's ability to sing empty praises to Sect Leader Wen and Sect Leader Jin without shame just for the sake of obtaining financial assistance. It was clear that neither sect leaders were buying whatever he said.

Sect Leader Wen did not bring his oldest son with him but brought his second son instead. Lan Qiren was probably still with Wen Ruohan, heading to wherever Wen Ruohan intended to be. Qingheng Jun had no doubt that there was an internal strife within the Wen Clan in regards to the clan succession. All this time Wen Ruohan had always been the pride of Wen Clan, and rightfully so, as he was indeed the strongest young cultivator of his generation.

However, when Sect Leader Yao asked about his whereabouts and was praising Wen Ruohan's prowess, Sect Leader Wen had given him a dirty look. Where had all the affection for Wen Ruohan gone to?

Thinking about all of this was giving him unnecessary headaches. He should head home.

His steps halted as he was greeted by Sect Leader Nie. "It's been a while, Qingheng Jun."

Qingheng Jun nodded. "Sect Leader Nie."

"Is my son doing well in Gusu? He's usually not the type to be able to sit still," Sect Leader Nie asked.

Qingheng Jun smiled. "Young Master Nie is improving each day. He seems to be making friends with Young Master Jiang and Qiren."

"Qiren... Lan Qiren, your younger brother, right? I rarely do see him," Sect Leader Nie commented. "Is he doing fine?"

As safe as he could be with one Wen Ruohan. Qingheng Jun ought to talk to his brother soon. He noticed Lan Qiren had been a little distant from him lately. He used to express whatever troubled his mind but these days even though Qingheng Jun could see he was in distress, Lan Qiren refused to confide with him. If Qingheng Jun had to be honest, he felt a little sad and ignored.

"I think Qiren might be in his rebellious stage," Qingheng Jun sighed.

Sect Leader Nie laughed. "Your brother, the serious, rule-abiding Lan Qiren, rebelling? I find it hard to believe."

"He is a teenager, he is at a delicate age."

“He is hardly a teenager, he is... what, seventeen or eighteen? He’s a young adult. In a few years he might be getting married, even.”

“Speaking of marriage, I’ve heard Lanling Jin is already looking for a wife candidate for Young Master Jin?” Qingheng Jun asked. He recalled Sect Leader Jin sent a letter to Gusu asking if there was any female cultivator at Gusu Lan of marriageable age. There was none, and even if there was, Qingheng Jun doubted any of the elders would let a precious female disciple to be married off to Jin Guangshan, who was rumored to be visiting brothels quite often.

“They sent a letter to me too. I threw it straight to the fire stove,” Sect Leader Nie snorted. “Even if I have a thousand daughters, none of them are marrying that Jin Guangshan.”

“...”

“Sect Leader Yu might agree to a match, though. Meishan Yu cultivators are highly talented and their temper is formidable. I doubt Jin Guangshan will be able to keep playing around if he were to marry someone from Meishan Yu,” Sect Leader Nie said. “What do you think, Qingheng Jun?”

Gossiping is prohibited so Qingheng Jun chose to not discuss the issue further. Originally he just wanted to ask Sect Leader Nie’s opinion since he felt not responding to the request might appear rude to Lanling Jin, but since even Qinghe Nie didn’t bother sending a reply, Qingheng Jun decided if Lanling Jin wanted to feel offended, they should fix Jin Guangshan’s attitude first. He imagined if Gusu Lan had a full grown female member now the clan elders would rather break the rule and lie than letting her be in the hands of a promiscuous man, no matter how rich and talented.

“I think I’m also going to find someone for my son after he comes back from Gusu,” Sect Leader Nie suddenly said.

Qingheng Jun blinked. “Young Master Nie? That soon?”

“He’s not too young to be married. Setting up an engagement would be good. He never shows interest in women and marriage. If I don’t find someone for him, he might end up alone,” Sect Leader Nie said.

As long as it was for Nie Yizhou’s own good, it should be fine. It was the Nie Clan’s business anyway so Qingheng Jun offered no comment to that, only wishing Sect Leader Nie good luck in looking for a suitable bride candidate for Nie Yizhou. He said his goodbye and they parted ways. Qingheng Jun decided to stop by the market in Caiyi Town to purchase some loquats to satisfy his sweet cravings.

With both Lanling Jin and Qinghe Nie looking for matches for their clan heirs, sooner or later one of Gusu Lan clan elders would probably ask Qingheng Jun if he ever had any intention to marry either. Granted, Gusu Lan was not as pushy as the others but that didn’t mean they wanted their clan to die down. As long as he, the sect leader didn’t reject the idea of marriage the clan elders would encourage him to settle down soon.

“Young miss, these loquats are of very good quality ah!” He heard the seller speak to the person next to him.

“They look smaller compared to the ones in my hometown.”

“Aiyaah, they may be smaller but they are a lot sweeter! Here, I’ll let you have a taste, even give you a discount since you’re so pretty, how about that?”

The maiden spoke in a different dialect. She must not be a local. Qingheng Jun glanced at her out of curiosity. She was dressed in all white, with a straw hat and a veil covering the lower half of her face.

... Ah, lip service indeed. The vendor could not even see her face, how could he tell that she was pretty? Qingheng Jun however could indeed see from the side that her lashes were long and her eyes were the shade of beautiful gold.

The maiden in fact was not swayed by the compliment at all. Instead, she suddenly asked, "Sir, have you heard of any strange occurrence lately? Any story about a madman or people

going rampage?"

The loquat vendor laughed. "Funny you ask that, just yesterday I heard from a traveler that there was a madman going amok in Jinlan City, up the north."

"Did he say what the madman looks like?" Her voice sounded alarmed.

"Eh, I don't know. A madman looks like a madman, what else? You should probably stay away from him, I heard the cultivators in Jinlan City all suffered from grave and fatal injuries trying to restrain the man."

"Thank you for telling me, sir. I'll be sure to buy some loquats next time," she said and hastily left.

The loquat vendor cursed. "Aiyah, youths these days, so eager to chase after fame, ignoring dangers... oh, Young Master Lan, are you here to get some loquats?"

Qingheng Jun smiled. "I will have a basket. Can you tell me more about the madman?"

"For Young Master Lan, anything is possible! So you see, there's a rumor that the madman is actually..."

Being raised as a servant, Wei Changze was never good at refusing people's requests, especially if they came from someone older or of superior status. Teacher Lan just happened to be someone older and someone he should respect and hence, he eventually found himself sitting across the desk where one Cangse Sanren was sulkily copying the rules. Sometimes Wei Changze wished he could find it in himself to rebel.

He sighed in his head and looked down back at the book he was reading.

Long slim fingers suddenly poked at the page he was reading. Wei Changze blinked. He looked up and Cangse Sanren smirked as she successfully caught his attention. Wei Changze's eyes fell on the piece of paper she had been writing on and his eyes twitched. The text was left half written and there were ugly doodles of Teacher Lan instead. "Do not waste time, paper, or ink. Hurry up and finish your punishment."

Cangse Sanren yawned. "But it's so boring."

"... A punishment is not supposed to be fun."

"Don't you think copying rules is a waste of time, paper, and ink instead?" She said.

It certainly is, Wei Changze thought. Copying and memorizing rules helped little in stopping people like Cangse Sanren from breaking them. In Yunmeng Jiang anyone caught breaking the rules or skipping practices would be punished with labor work like cleaning out the farm animal dung or helping the elderly at the market carry their carts or rowing their boats. However, just like how Yunmeng Jiang had their own way of punishing their disciples, Gusu Lan and other sects also had their own ways to maintain discipline. It wasn't an outsider's place to question it.

"You shouldn't have done anything to get yourself punished then," Wei Changze replied.

"How would I know? People learn from mistakes, haven't you heard that?"

"Is it not best to avoid something you already know is a mistake?" Wei Changze questioned.

"But where would the fun be?"

"You're troubling others for fun. It is rude."

"Troubling? You get to spend hours with a beautiful young maiden instead of waiting by other young masters, there is no better way to spend your time," Cangse Sanren shamelessly exclaimed.

Wei Changze bit his lower lip. He looked down. "I am a servant of the Jiang Clan. It is my duty to assist Fengmian." It was also his duty to not get into Jiang Fengmian's way and taking the time of the lady his friend was interested in contradicted his principles. His purpose was to make things easier for Jiang Fengmian. He wasn't supposed to get close to her.

Why did the future him have to marry someone Jiang Fengmian liked? Even if Sect Leader Jiang and his wife disapprove of a marriage with a rogue cultivator, it didn't feel right for him to snatch her away.

When he noticed Cangse Sanren inching away and looking like she was about to escape, his hand deftly reached for his sword. Cangse Sanren flinched as the sheathed sword was thrust right in front of her, the long blade blocking her way. She turned at him and pouted. "Oh, come on! We could be in Caiyi Town enjoying some good spicy chicken skewers and Emperor's Smile now!"

Wei Changze was not swayed, although for a split second he thought her pouting face was actually quite cute. He shook his head to chase the thought away. "Finish your punishment fast and you can go wherever you want after that."

"Copying this is going to take days!"

"It will take months if you keep stalling it. Sit down," he insisted.

"Tssk. Killjoy. For a Yunmeng Jiang disciple you sure are a stickler for rules. Are you planning to marry into the Gusu Lan Sect?" She huffed and sat back, grabbing her brush.

Wei Changze did not answer. He went back to his book. Cangse Sanren narrowed her eyes. She sighed and grabbed her brush again. "Young Master Wei."

“ ... ”

"Young Master Wei."

" ... "

“Wei Changze.”

“ ... ”

“... A Ze?”

Wei Changze looked at her incredulously. What... what did she just call him?

Cangse Sanren grinned. “What? Don’t look at me like that. You’re the one who chose to not respond before. So, A Ze, tell me what you guys do for fun here. You all have been here months before us, there must be a secret spot where I can slack... ehem, meditate in seclusion, right?”

“... If you don’t intend to study why even bother coming here?” Wei Changze questioned.

“Eh, I do want to study. I just didn’t expect a sect as prestigious as Gusu Lan would only give out boring history lectures. I was expecting something good, you know? Everything my Shifu taught me was useful knowledge for night hunts,” she said.

“Immortal Master Baoshan Sanren lives in seclusion, away from the people. She stays away from clans and cultivation sects, of course you won’t learn the things you learn here from her,” Wei Changze sighed.

“What about you? Why did you come here?” She asked.

“I am a servant and disciple of Yunmeng Jiang. I am merely accompanying the sect heir.”

“But Young Master Jiang lets you come here as a fellow disciple. He seems to treat you as a brother and a close friend. Why do you keep acting and speaking like a servant?” She asked.

“I am one.”

“Do you not think that’s insulting to Young Master Jiang?”

Wei Changze frowned. “How is it insulting him, when I am merely acting my place?”

Cangse Sanren clicked her tongue. “Oh, you fuddy duddy. I thought you were smart, but you are pretty dumb, aren’t you?”

“What-”

“Dummy, dumb dumb. A Ze is a dummy~” She sang.

Wei Changze’s face turned red. “Stop singing and do your punishment or I will-”

“What are you going to do? Is Wei Gege going to punish me personally?” She teased.

Wei Changze choked. “You... get back here and do your punishment, Liang Xingxiu!”

She jumped away from him, then pointed at him while laughing. "You dropped the formality! So I can keep calling you A Ze, right? Or do you prefer Wei Gege after all? Your face is red!"

Wei Changze quickly fixed his expression, taking a deep breath to calm himself. Cangse Sanren however only continued to make his blood boil by sticking out her tongue and running towards the window. Wei Changze gawked. "Wait!"

"No can wait!" She cheered and jumped down.

"That..." Wei Changze was at loss of word and had no choice but to chase after her.

Needing someone to show her around? What a crapload of bullshit she was saying. How was she able to maneuver her way through Cloud Recesses without alerting a single Lan disciple, all while he was chasing her? Moreover, she was fast. Wei Changze was definitely not slow - he was one of the fastest runners in Yunmeng, yet he still was unable to catch up to her.

She jumped over the wall and Wei Changze secretly cursed under his breath as he was left with no choice but to follow her. He would just have to apologize to Teacher Lan and Qingheng Jun later. Or maybe keep it a secret. As long as he brought back Cangse Sanren, nobody had to know about the two of them breaking the rules.

"Wei Gege, you're so slow ah, can't keep up with me?" Cangse Sanren giggled as she kept running downhill.

Wei Changze did not answer but gritted his teeth as he exerted more energy to push himself faster. "Stop making trouble and come back!"

Realising he was catching up, Cangse Sanren pulled out her sword from the scabbard and hopped onto it. She did not forget to turn around and winked at him. "Too bad Wei Gege, I'm not planning to waste my time on copying stuff. I'm not a fuddy duddy like you."

Wei Changze's eyes twitched. He pulled out his own sword and followed after her. Cangse Sanren soared through the sky faster than anyone he had seen. He almost couldn't believe he was wasting his spiritual (and mental and physical) energy just to keep up with this person.

Cangse Sanren glanced at him one more time. Eventually her sword slowed down and she hopped off, landing gracefully. Wei Changze released the breath he had been holding earlier as he finally was able to reach her. "Why...do you have to..."

Cangse Sanren grinned. "Finally. It's not that hard, isn't it?"

He blinked. "What?"

Cangse Sanren laughed. She pointed at the building behind her. Wei Changze finally noticed that they had landed right in front of the tavern at Caiyi Town, that served the infamous Emperor's Smile.

"I got you out. We're finally here, out on this beautiful evening, to enjoy a nice good jar of Emperor's Smile!" Cangse Sanren exclaimed. She then fluttered her eyes and patted her own body. "Oh, I forgot to bring my money bag. Wei Gege, how much do you have with you?"

Wei Changze looked at her incredulously. This person... did she just trick him into going outside by making him chase her all the way from the library pavilion of Cloud Recess to this tavern in Caiyi Town? All that riling up she did, the embarrassing song, her entire schtick was just to lure him here?

A smile slowly curved on Wei Changze's face.

Cangse Sanren's eyes widened. "Ooh, Gege, you're smiling! I knew it, Wei Gege is not unreasonable after all. Now, let's go inside and-"

"Fuck no."

"..."

Chapter End Notes

CSSR: i think i broke him

AN: So this chapter has more sides than the main, but we'll get back to the main after this

EDIT: Edited CSSR's name in the speech.

Rumour of a madman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan Qiren woke up to the sound of a rooster. He squinted his eyes several times before he was fully awake. He groaned and pushed away the limbs of one Qishan Wen heir that had been draped all over his body the whole night. Wen Ruohan grunted a little in his sleep but rolled to the side and continued to snore. Last night had been quite the revelation and Lan Qiren wasn't sure what to do with the information yet but for now, some morning workout and meditation might help clear his mind.

It was still very early in the morning, though looking through the window Lan Qiren could see a couple of elderly Wens already out feeding their ducks and chickens. He went outside to look for a well to wash up and found Wen Ruoyu's wife already up, also feeding the roosters and hens at her backyard. Madam Wen noticed him and gave him a sweet smile. "Good morning, Young Master Lan. You're up very early. Why not get some more sleep?"

Lan Qiren shook his head. "I'm always up at this time."

"I've heard that Gusu Lan cultivators are very disciplined. I admire that," Madam Wen praised. She walked to the well and picked up a wooden pail. "Ah, do you mind waiting a little while I prepare some warm water?"

"Please let me help, you're already giving us a place to stay for the night," Lan Qiren quickly offered and took the pail from her hands. Madam Wen didn't look like she was a cultivator - at least not one who trained for increasing physical strength. He would feel bad making the petite lady do all the hard work.

"I can't let the guests do the work-"

"Please let me thank you. A little chore is not hard for me," Lan Qiren said.

A smile formed in Madam Wen's face. "Very well then, I appreciate the help. If you could kindly fill up the jar over there with water, I could use the spare time to pick up some vegetables for breakfast."

Lan Qiren easily filled up the large earthenware jar in no time. The task would have been extremely tiring for a non-cultivators like Madam Wen but it wasn't hard for him. He washed up and found a secluded place behind the woodshed to practice his routine workouts. By the time he went back indoors Wen Ruoyu had returned from the river with some freshly caught fish and Madam Wen was already in front of the stove stirring a pot of herbal soup.

Lan Qiren stopped himself from entering the kitchen when Wen Ruoyu placed the gutted fish down on the table and went to his wife to hug her from behind.

He was suddenly reminded of seeing Lan Wangji in the library, working on a document, while Wei Wuxian would come from behind and hug his husband. It was a normal occurrence in Cloud Recess, as both Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian never seemed like they could get enough of each other.

Lan Qiren would normally scold his nephew-in-law for displaying excessive affections in public, but now that he thought about it, it might not be something too bad for a married couple to do. Better to have an affectionate marriage than a loveless, ruined one, right? Berating his nephew for spoiling his partner probably stemmed more from his dislike of said partner instead of the action itself, which wasn't right.

....

.... Lan Qiren's face soured as Wei Wuxian's shit-eating grin appeared in his head.

But Wei Wuxian, that rascal was still too much! Lan Qiren could forgive holding hands and hugging, but sneaking your hand inside your husband's robes or kissing in public were completely inappropriate! Not to mention the way he never bothered hiding the lovemaking marks that always gave Lan Qiren high blood pressure! And his shamelessness that made him spit out blood so often-

"Are you jealous, RenRen? Want to get married and be lovey-dovey too?" Wen Ruohan's voice whispered right at his ear as the man snuck up from behind, wrapping an arm around the neck and the waist each.

Of course, this man, another embodiment of bold and shamelessness, was also adding to the hundred other reasons why someone like Wei Wuxian would never be Lan Qiren's favourite nephew-in-law (and he only had one). Being harassed by shameless people in two lifetimes, who could stand it? "Get lost."

Wen Ruohan clicked his tongue. "Always that line, RenRen. Don't you have anything else to say?"

He would say 'fuck off' if he could curse but Lan Qiren's pride dictated that even in the face of one Wen Ruohan he should not lose his dignity. Well, not anymore, he didn't have much left after several encounters with him. He pushed Wen Ruohan away. "Did you just wake up? Why haven't you washed up?"

Wen Ruohan ran his fingers through his thick black hair. "I did."

"And you still look like that?"

"What, just as handsome as when I woke up?"

"Just as unruly-looking, you mean. Your hair is out of place," Lan Qiren grunted and fished out a comb from his pouch.

In his youth of his first lifetime he had raised Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. Then years later he had helped his nephew to take care of the young Lan Yuan. Lan Qiren therefore didn't think much about it when he naturally used his comb to fix Wen Ruohan's hair, until he saw the surprise in Wen Ruohan's eyes.

His hand froze. A shade of scarlet washed over his ears as he realized how out of place it was for him to do that to a stranger. Even if they were kind of friends now (not really?), how could he do that to Wen Ruohan?! It must be this man's fault for continuously acting casually with him, that Lan Qiren found himself feeling way too comfortable doing that! Lan Qiren quickly retracted his hand and looked away. "Apologies, I stepped out of line-"

But Wen Ruohan swiftly grabbed his wrist. The comb dropped. Lan Qiren swallowed hard as he stared back at Wen Ruohan's deep dark eyes. For a second he found himself unable to breathe. It felt as if he was standing on the edge of a cliff that he wouldn't be able to climb back.

And Wen Ruohan continued to burn him with his gaze. For what felt like an eternity, there was not a single word exchanged between them.

"Ehem."

He snapped back to reality and pushed Wen Ruohan away.

Madam Wen, who had been standing there for quite a while watching the moment with a flushed face cleared her throat. "Um... breakfast is ready."

"Apologies for standing in your way," Lan Qiren said and picked up the dropped comb before moving to the side to allow Madam Wen to walk to the dining table.

Madam Wen laughed awkwardly. "It's fine, it's fine." She was the one actually feeling sorry. The air between the two was getting weird. She could see Wen Ruohan practically staring at Lan Qiren like he was a piece of meat.

Ah... why did she feel like... something was calling her to grab papers and a brush?

Breakfast was partaken in silence, save for Madam Wen's occasional chatter asking Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan if the soup was good.

“So what is your plan today?” Wen Ruoyu asked.

“Check out the temple,” Wen Ruohan replied.

Wen Ruoyu looked relieved. “That’s good. I’ll also help with the preparations.”

Wen Ruohan sighed. “We need to do a lot, Ruoyu. The sealing ceremony, a way to lock our memories...”

“That’s dangerous, Ruohan. We could either lose our minds or completely lose our entire memories. It isn’t easy to isolate a specific memory,” Wen Ruoyu warned.

“Then what countermeasure do you suggest if one of us were discovered, captured, and tortured?” Wen Ruohan questioned. “We don’t know the location of the other three pieces but one piece is enough to be able to...”

“If we forget about the Yin Iron, we wouldn’t have a clue if he ever comes here and takes it back. We would also forget about A Lin’s sacrifice. Locking your memories should not be an option. It’s just not worth the risk.”

Wen Ruohan clicked his tongue. “That’s why I said instead of sealing it, we should learn to master it...”

“That’s even more dangerous! Look at you, your mood swings have become worse! It’s going to affect you, just like how it affected Sect Leader-”

“When did I have mood swings?” Wen Ruohan looked annoyed.

Wen Ruoyu rolled his eyes. “Have you not seen yourself losing temper one second, acting like an idiot another second, looking like you want to eat Young Master Lan in one second-”

“Bold of you to assume I ever stop thinking about eating RenRen-”

“Enough,” Lan Qiren stopped them before the argument could escalate further. “Arguing isn’t going to solve this. We’ll see if the temple fits, then we can think.” Sealing the Yin Iron at the temple might not last, judging from his previous timeline. He had no idea why Wen Ruohan in his original timeline decided to take the Yin Iron back if he was the one sealing it, but whatever the case was, the relic wasn’t going to stay that long in Dafan Mountain anyway if things were to follow the original events.

Madam Wen kindly packed some steamed buns for them to bring along while the three men headed to the mountains. They passed by several villagers, who did not forget to smile and greet them. Lan Qiren was slightly, but pleasantly surprised by the warmth and friendliness of the villagers. Now he felt really bad thinking about the terrible fate suffered by these people in his original timeline. Living in an isolated village in the middle of the mountains like this, no wonder these people had no idea about all the chaos and cruelty caused by Qishan Wen. Yet, they were still deemed criminals by association just because they shared the same surname.

Lan Qiren glanced at the two cousins who were talking to each other, exchanging stories and laughter about one of the villagers who recently got drunk on a new wine and face-planted into the horse dung. “Young Master Wen.”

Both cousins stopped talking and looked at him.

He forgot, they were both Wens and were of the same generation. “Wen Ruohan,” he corrected himself.

Wen Ruohan grinned. “Well, Ruoyu was born few months earlier than me, so how about Wen Er Gege?”

Lan Qiren had to stop himself from retching. *'Er Gege'* quite literally reminded him of a certain gremlin who by the way, screamed out that word almost every night to the point of nearly giving Lan Qiren qi deviation. He had to personally remind Lan Wangji to plaster an enormous amount of silencing charms on the walls of Jingshi, because at night the Quiet Room certainly wasn't quiet! "Second Young Master Wen," he gritted his teeth.

"Alright, alright. Our RenRen is still cold. Wen Ruohan is fine. What is it?"

"How do you plan to master the Yin Iron?" He asked.

Wen Ruohan frowned. "I have no idea yet. Most spiritual items are usually designed to obey their masters from the get go, since people normally only obtain items they are capable of using."

True. Even in the case of something basic like a spiritual sword, cultivators usually would not be able obtain their own sword until they reached a certain level of cultivation. High quality weapons like Wei Wuxian's Suibian and Jiang Wanyin's Zidian could only be wielded by the owners and even sealed themselves in the absence of the owner. For this reason, Wei Wuxian's inventions were so popular because not only they were effective, they could be used by even beginners, likely due to the fact that the inventor himself did not have his golden core when he developed them.

It was a different case for items made or imbued with resentful energy. Normal spiritual weapons were designed to serve their masters. Demonic tools were designed to have destructive powers. One could not possibly attain loyalty from spirits of those who passed unjustly and full of resentment. The only way to master them was to force them into obedience, which was why most people failed to do that. Wei Wuxian wasn't the first one to think about using resentful energy, he was just the first one (and perhaps only one) known to somehow be able to do it without instantly killing himself.

There was just no way to completely avoid the backlash. "Do you know how people who resort to demonic cultivation in the past usually work?" Lan Qiren asked.

"On how to master resentful energy? Not quite. There are already very few of them and none has ever lived long enough to tell the tale, nor smart enough to record it. The only one who

we can consider succeeded in doing that is Xue Chonghai, and even he met a miserable end,” Wen Ruohan said. “Not exactly a success story.”

“Five Major Sects against one man, even if he controlled the Tortoise of Slaughter, he couldn’t possibly win, especially since he was already driven to madness by his own creation,” Wen Ruoyu said. “If even Xue Chonghai who cultivated for decades longer can’t control it, I don’t see why you thought you can do it.”

“Well, Wen Mao defeated him,” Wen Ruohan argued.

“With the help of other great sects, yes. Wen Mao is also my ancestor and I don’t use him as an excuse,” Wen Ruoyu pointed.

“Anyway, Xue Chonghai’s method, albeit morally wrong, was quite interesting. He was able to produce living corpses he used as puppets and controlled them by manipulating the resentful energy,” Wen Ruohan stated.

Wen Ruoyu shuddered. “Think of all the poor souls who can’t reincarnate...”

Wen Ruohan ignored him. “Do you know about *gǔ*? You take several venomous creatures, put them in a jar and make them devour each other to create the most lethal, complex, poison. Now imagine the same thing, but with resentful spirits. You make them devour each other-”

“And how do you plan to handle the end product - a lethal, complex poison?” Lan Qiren questioned. “The caster will be able to attain wealth and fortune but they would have to constantly feed the creature, or they would be the one devoured.”

“There will never be a shortage of bad people and resentment in this world.”

“And you plan to prey on that? You should check back on your morals, Wen Ruohan!” Lan Qiren angrily said.

In the case of Wei Wuxian, he ended up being the one devoured by the *gu* - albeit there were many other outside circumstances out of his control - it still did not change that Wei Wuxian held some responsibility in causing the deaths of many. He paid for it with his own life and Lan Qiren liked to think that the young man atoned for it already, but Wei Wuxian probably still wasn't able to forgive himself for losing control. He just learned to accept it, knowing nothing could be changed and the best he could do was to live his present and future.

Or maybe not, because why else had he ended up here if not because the rascal dabbled in something dangerous again?! What was he thinking? Oh wait, he clearly wasn't thinking! Lan Qiren remembered a few months before he time-traveled to the past, Wei Wuxian could not withstand the summer heat and decided that it would be a brilliant idea to bring snow early to Cloud Recess. He almost froze the entire sect, but thanks to Lan Wangji, he only managed to bury Jingshi halfway in snow instead. The couple temporarily moved the guests' quarter for a couple of weeks until Jingshi was cleared up and already the next day there were people complaining about noises, as Lan Wangji had taken to personally 'punish' his husband.

Ehem. Anyway, Lan Qiren was now back in the past with knowledge of the future. Wei Wuxian might have regrets he couldn't change but Lan Qiren now had the chance to stop him from even having those regrets. Wei Changze's suggestion of seducing Wen Ruohan was absurd but approaching him was admittedly the right direction, otherwise he would have never known all the hidden conflicts that took place.

"I was wrong, RenRen. Forgive me, okay?" Wen Ruohan said and winked, bringing him back from his temporary musings. He took Lan Qiren's hand and grinned. "I'm glad that RenRen is concerned about me."

"Who's worried about you? This concerns the entire cultivation world," Lan Qiren said and shook his hand away.

"We've arrived," Wen Ruoyu announced.

If there was one thing that did not change, it was how dim the goddess's temple looked like. The Dancing Goddess's face was not as prominent as the disciples described. It probably had not gained any sentience yet.

“Think this is good?” Wen Ruohan said.

“The surrounding place is full of positive energy. People also occasionally come here to pray and ask for good wishes. It might help to slowly diminish the amount of negative energy from the Yin Iron,” Wen Ruoyu said.

Wen Ruohan hummed. “If we’re talking about a place with good energy, do you think we can hide it somewhere else, like even Cloud Recess?”

Lan Qiren froze at the suggestion.

Wen Ruoyu frowned. “That means disclosing to the Sect Leader about our clan secret. Also, are they willing to do it for us?”

That wouldn’t be a smart move. Wen Ruohan and Wen Ruoyu at this point were unaware that the second piece was in Cloud Recess, but if they were to come bearing the Yin Iron, they would find out since the pieces could sense each other. “That cannot be done. Hiding something so powerful and sought after by Sect Leader Wen is exposing Cloud Recess to an attack by Qishan Wen,” Lan Qiren rejected the idea.

“I don’t think the Sect Leader will go as far as attacking another major sect...” Wen Ruoyu said.

“Oh, he will,” Wen Ruohan rolled his eyes. “I’m sorry, forget my idea. He might actually do that. We’re talking about a guy who has no qualms sacrificing his own children. If we were to do that and he were to find out, he’d send an army to burn down the whole place.”

Oh wow, it was scary how Wen Ruohan was predicting his own future self’s doing.

Wen Ruohan smirked at Lan Qiren. “Don’t worry, RenRen. The only time I will bring a mob of people to Cloud Recess is to carry all the betrothal gifts for you.”

“Get lost.”

“Again, RenRen, is that your favourite word now?” Wen Ruohan sighed. He glanced at the Dancing Goddess statue. “Well, since sealing it in other places is out of the question, I think we can agree on keeping it here?”

Wen Ruoyu nodded. “It should be fine. Maybe we can even split open the Goddess statue and keep it hidden inside.”

“Nobody is going to come and steal this statue, right?”

Wen Ruoyu laughed. “It’s made of stone, nobody is going to steal this.”

Lan Qiren hummed. Indeed, hiding it inside the statue - if not because he already had the knowledge of the relic being inside it - might be a good choice. The place was surrounded with good energy, there weren’t many people other than the villagers or nearby locals, and the statue was not only too heavy to be moved but also not worthy to be stolen.

The only possible danger was...

Something clicked inside Lan Qiren’s brain and he suddenly moved to grab Wen Ruohan’s arm, much to the latter’s surprise. Lan Qiren held his breath, remembering something crucial. “What if the statue begins gaining sentience and starts snatching spirits?”

Both Wens exchanged wary glances before looking back at Lan Qiren. “What do you mean?” Wen Ruohan asked.

“Didn’t Xue Chonghai use the Tortoise of Slaughter to kill people and snatch spirits to fuel the Yin Iron? Maybe, just maybe... what if having an empty vessel causes the Yin Iron to try and regain its power by attacking people and snatching spirits?” Lan Qiren questioned, because now he finally recalled something very important.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning’s family - including Wen Ruoyu, were killed by the Dancing Goddess. Lan Qiren was unclear whether it happened because future Wen Ruohan took out the Yin Iron, causing the statue to go berserk to recover the loss; or if Wen Ruohan took out the Yin Iron because the relic was the one causing the berserk, but either way keeping it here would cause the statue to gain sentience and kill the people here.

“Well... that would be bad,” Wen Ruoyu said. “Wouldn’t the good energy surrounding this place negate it, though? If the goddess can gain sentience and start snatching spirits, wouldn’t it have done that long ago?”

“The amount of energy here is indeed good, but not high enough to counter the resentment from the Yin Iron. A very slow build up of good qi cannot stand up to a sudden absurd amount of bad energy. It would be like trying to extinguish fire with a sprinkle of water at a time. Not to mention, not every wish made is with good intent. If someone were to come here bearing malice, it can immediately trigger the relic,” Lan Qiren explained.

Wen Ruohan scratched the back of his head. “Alright, fair point, RenRen. As expected of Young Master Lan. So what do we do now, if we can’t seal it here?”

The three of them fell in silence.

Wen Ruoyu opened his mouth. “Well-”

Before he could continue talking, a loud noise could be heard outside. Wen Ruoyu’s ears perked up. It sounded awfully like his wife calling for him. He rushed outside and indeed found his wife, who was panting. She must have ran all the way to the temple to get him. “What’s wrong?” He asked.

“An emergency. Village Chief Su’s son has been attacked and the chief is desperately calling for you,” she said.

“There are other healers,” Wen Ruoyu frowned.

“Brother Five and Sister Six have administered the emergency first aid but his condition is still critical,” Madam Wen said. “I’ve also taken a look at the patient. He might need your expertise.”

Wen Ruoyu sighed. “Alright, show me the patient. What happened to him?”

“Attacked by a rogue demonic cultivator.”

“Demonic cultivator?” Wen Ruoyu was shocked. “Is it the rumoured one, the one said to appear in Jinlan City? He’s in this area?”

Hearing the word ‘demonic cultivator’, both Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren also became wary and decided to follow Wen Ruoyu and his wife downhill to their clinic.

“The neighbouring village. The doctor there is unable to do anything. In fact, Village Chief Su’s son would have died if not because there was a cultivator from Gusu Lan who happened to be there and helped save him. He’s also injured, but not as bad,” she said.

Lan Qiren blinked. From Gusu Lan? “Who?”

“They call him Qingheng Jun.”

“ ... ”

That was his brother! What was his brother doing, he wasn't supposed to be in Jinlan City or in the neighbouring village -

... oh.

Cangse Sanren decided she really hated Wei Changze. Really, what had she done to him that he disliked her this much? All she did was pull some innocent prank... and it wasn't like she wasn't planning to share or not paying back the money for Emperor's Smile.

Nope, he had to drag her back to Cloud Recess, reported her action, and now doubled her punishment.

Worst of all...

He tied her up with a binding spell here in this library to force her to finish the punishment!

"Your hands aren't moving," Wei Changze uttered without looking at her, eyes glued to the book.

Cangse Sanren cursed under her breath, moving the one free hand to write. Occasionally she tried inching away from Wei Changze but the man would immediately sense the tug on the binding spell and pulled her back.

"No slacking. The faster you finish, the sooner you'll be free," he warned her.

Cangse Sanren clicked her tongue.

Hmm.

Strange.

She normally did not like being restricted, but why was it that having her hand tied up by him made her feel super excited? Also, the way he treated her coldly but in the contrast was very 'passionate' in getting her punished somehow just made her feel like teasing him more, just to see how far he would take his punishment.

Cangse Sanren hummed, a faint pink blush appeared on her cheeks.

Dear heavens, maybe Shifu was right. She was weird.

Wei Changze was very much satisfied with the outcome. Cangse Sanren may have attempted to play him but he was not one who would easily give up, nor fazed by oddities. If her aim was to have some fun with him, he was just going to show her how boring he could be, while having fun himself at the same time.

Seeing how quiet Cangse Sanren had become, she must be thinking that messing with Wei Changze wasn't worth it after all. Someone so free like her, how could she stand getting restricted like this?

Next time she tried playing with him again, he'd tie all her limbs together. That would show her who was the boss.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case anyone is wondering why some details are different, I did bend the canon to suit this fic.

Looking for the madman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sure enough, when Lan Qiren arrived at the clinic downhill, he was greeted by the sight of Qingheng Jun sitting at one corner. One of the healers was still bandaging his arm - a bloodied mess that would make a normal person shudder. Part of his robes were torn up and caked with mud, suggesting that whoever he encountered was definitely not any normal person. After all, Qingheng Jun did not just earn his title for nothing. He had always been known to be exceptionally strong and earned the respect of other major sect leaders twice his age.

“Xiongzhong,” Lan Qiren uttered in disbelief. “What happened?”

Qingheng Jun was just as surprised as Lan Qiren himself. “Qiren, why are you here...” his voice trailed off as his eyes fell on the sight of Wen Ruohan behind his brother.

“This clinic belongs to the subgroup of Qishan Wen, they are practitioners of healing cultivation,” Lan Qiren explained. “What happened?”

Qingheng Jun sighed. “It was a long story.”

“This is too much. Why haven’t anyone done something about this?” Village Chief Su cried as he knelt by the bedside where his son laid unconscious. “Why haven’t anyone been able to capture the madman?”

Wen Ruoyu patted his back. “We will try our best to save him, Village Chief Su. For now, please move aside and let me resume treatment.”

Village Chief Su moved aside and wiped his tears. “This place is under the protection of Qishan Wen, why haven’t Qishan Wen done anything?”

Wen Ruohan frowned. “We haven’t received any report about a demonic cultivator.”

“The demonic cultivator came here from Jinlan City. Before that he was spotted in a different city, and escaped before any major sects could get him,” Qingheng Jun suddenly spoke. “All the travelling cultivators were fatally injured and he escaped before cultivators from major sects could get to him.”

Wen Ruohan turned his glance towards the Gusu Lan sect Leader and greeted Qingheng Jun. “Apologies for my rudeness, I should have greeted you earlier, Sect Leader Lan.”

Qingheng Jun nodded and eyed Wen Ruohan. “You must be Wen Ruohan. I’ve heard you’ve been taking care of my brother.”

“On the contrary, RenRen-”

Lan Qiren quickly stepped on his foot.

Qingheng Jun raised an eyebrow at the nickname, though he was more amused by Lan Qiren’s reaction. He knew his brother was not the type to take jokes all that well, but seeing the way he reacted told Qingheng Jun that Lan Qiren had developed a relationship close enough with Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan cleared his throat. “Ehem, Second Young Master Lan has been the one taking care of me very well. Anyway, back to the madman - have you got any clue about him?”

Qingheng Jun shook his head. “His face is unrecognizable. He appears almost like someone who is in a constant state of qi deviation. Likely a backlash from attempting demonic cultivation. He is not someone we can easily subjugate. I will ask for help from Lan Elders who are more well-versed in dealing with demonic arts.”

Wen Ruohan hummed. “How long has this madman been around? A demonic cultivator suffering a backlash, moreover said to be in a state of constant qi deviation can’t have

survived for that long. His body and spirit would eventually get worn out from the stress.”

“That’s because he’s not alive.”

They turned to the newcomer, who had been staying silent at the side since earlier. Lan Qiren almost did not notice her since she had been sitting quietly. He took note of her plain white robes, straw hat, and thin veil covering her face. He felt as if he should know this person, but... it couldn’t be that woman, right?

“Who are you? Can you explain that?” Wen Ruohan asked.

The maiden bowed slightly. “This one is Bai Yiqing, just a rogue cultivator. I have been chasing the man for months.”

Well shit. This really was his sister-in-law!

Lan Qiren did not recall his sister-in-law ever donning a face veil before. Qingheng Jun claimed he had fallen in love with her at first sight and the Bai Yiqing in his memories was indeed a peerless beauty. Did his brother fall for a lady who covered her face with a veil and a straw hat? What did he see in this lady? He couldn’t see her face or her personality, how did he fall at first sight?!

“I think we need a full story on this. For now, how about explain what caused the esteemed Qingheng Jun can be injured like this?” Wen Ruohan asked.

Not far from Jinlan City, was the the Yi City, written with the character 'coffin', due to stories of how the residents allegedly often suffer from misfortunes or pass at a young age, hence resulting in an abnormal number of coffin houses, added with the town's specialty in producing coffins and paper money. It was a city with already a bad fengshui. Jinlan City too, was once a dead city swarmed by demons in the past. It was only revived recently due to its

strategic location for trading, yet not many were fond of permanent residency there, often choosing to utilize the place solely for the purpose of conducting their businesses.

Qingheng Jun sent a short message to Cloud Recess, informing the elders that he would be returning later than expected due to an unexpected circumstance that required urgent intervention. The rumour of a demonic cultivator running amok was certainly not something he could just ignore.

He flew to Jinlan City, seeking for the rumoured demonic cultivator, as well as the mysterious maiden who was looking for said madman.

Qingheng Jun did not have to look too long. There was already a mob of people gathering in front of the local apothecary, with some bawling their eyes out while the rest whispered in low murmurs and hushed voices. Qingheng Jun approached one of the whispering locals and asked them, "What is the commotion?"

"A demonic cultivator ran amok and killed five people ah," said the old man. "They did nothing, they were just pulling a cart, then told the madman off for standing in the middle of a narrow road and blocking their way. Someone came to stop the madman but it was too late. We brought the injured people here, yet... looks like the healer is unable to do anything."

Qingheng Jun frowned. "Someone?"

The old man pointed at a figure, who was sitting on the floor while leaning against the wall. "The person over there. She claimed to be a rogue who has been chasing after the madman for so long, but I heard even a group of cultivators from large sects were unable to suppress him. It's a miracle she escaped with minimal injuries."

Qingheng Jun recognized her.

The maiden he saw at Caiyi Town. He remembered the pure white robes, thin veil and straw hat very well. He could see some red stains that were turning brown on the left side of her torso, as well as bandages wrapping her left arm. He waited until she eventually got up

herself, thanked the healer, and left the apothecary. As soon as she walked out, he ran up to her.

"Young maiden," he said.

The maiden turned around to face him. Golden eyes looked back at Qingheng Jun and again, it felt as if his breath was taken away.

"I heard you've been looking for the demonic cultivator for a while. Please let me offer you assistance. It seems like you're not in the best condition for a fight," said Qingheng Jun.

The maiden shook her head. "The demonic cultivator is not someone who can be cornered easily. I thank you for your offer, but I have a personal grudge to solve."

"This concerns the safety of people. It's not a matter of personal vengeance anymore, innocent civilians are being attacked," Qingheng Jun pointed.

The maiden fell silent for a moment. She turned her back again. "Do as you wish then."

He followed her as she continued walking. Her strides were long and rushed, yet still light and careful despite her injuries. She did not speak much, other than to answer Qingheng Jun's questions. Well, some of Qingheng Jun's questions.

"What is your name? Where do you come from?"

"..."

"... Do you belong to any sect?" Qingheng Jun tried again.

“Rogue,” she finally replied.

Well, he had guessed that much. She wasn’t wearing anything that could have represented a clan or a sect. Normal cultivators also would never face something as dangerous as a demonic cultivator alone, they would bring a fellow sect member or two at least. The sword she carried however was a proper spiritual sword made by a master blacksmith, meaning she had a proper teacher and learned proper cultivation.

He took out his qiankun pouch and handed her a loquat he purchased at Caiyi Town earlier. “Would you like a loquat?”

Her steps halted. She looked at him with questioning eyes. Qingheng Jun suddenly could feel butterflies in his stomach. She had not been friendly with him, why did he think she would accept food from a stranger-

“Thank you,” the maiden said and took the loquat, wiping it briefly with her sleeve and popping it into her mouth.

Qingheng Jun stared at her, momentarily stunned.

“Do you have more?” She asked.

“... Of course,” Qingheng Jun said and handed her some more loquats stored in his qiankun pouch. “You can have a lot. They’re sweet and good to replenish energy.”

“Mn,” she murmured and popped another one into her mouth.

Qingheng Jun felt very accomplished, like he had just tamed a stray, unapproachable cat. Twelve loquats and half a canister of water later, the maiden finally looked at his direction and asked, “Does Young Master Lan hail from a famous sect? You look like you have a lot of money.”

She must be quite isolated from society, considering she could not recognize the robes of Gusu Lan, one of the five major cultivation sects, known even to most commoners. Qingheng Jun nodded. "We are one of the influential ones."

"You must be strong. Do you not need permission from your leader, though?" She asked again. "I thought disciples of cultivation sects are restricted by rules. Or is your sect quite lax?"

On the contrary, Gusu Lan was known for having the most absurd amount of rules. No other sect would carve out '*one must not eat more than three bowls of rice*' on their walls. "I am the Sect Leader, actually," Qingheng Jun confessed.

The maiden was surprised. "How can you be the Sect Leader, you look so young!"

"My predecessors passed away and I had no choice."

"... I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Qingheng Jun said. It wasn't like he had forgotten the pain, but his uncles did raise him and Lan Qiren well enough for him to avenge his parents and lead the sect. "What about you? Even if you're a rogue, you must have learned from a master. I can tell that you studied cultivation properly and even have a spiritual sword."

The maiden clutched her sword tightly. "I had a master."

Had? Qingheng Jun was curious but restrained himself from asking further. It might be a sensitive topic and they weren't close enough to share something personal. He changed the subject. "How long has the demonic cultivator been roaming around?"

"Six months, maybe more," the maiden answered. "He first appeared in Yueyang. He moves from one city to another, slaughtering anyone who gets in his way."

"Strange. News of a demonic cultivator would usually travel fast but this is the first time I'm hearing about him," Qingheng Jun wondered. "Normally once identified, there would have been posters circulated or requests sent to cultivation sects. Isn't there a small cultivation sect in Yueyang?"

"It's impossible to track the demonic cultivator that way," the maiden said.

"Why?" Qingheng Jun was perplexed.

The maiden narrowed her eyes. "His appearance changes, every time."

"What do you mean by-"

"Stop."

Qingheng Jun halted his steps. He turned and his expression darkened when he noticed a man limping several metres away from them, in the middle of the road.

Crimson liquid was oozing out from the man's ears and fingertips. His long hair was in disarray; his robes were soaked in dark red' and malicious, resentful energy was emanating from his body. The bloodstain had yet to turn dark, a sign that this was a man who had just killed somebody.

Qingheng Jun immediately grabbed his sword.

The man turned around and Qingheng Jun was appalled by the blood dripping from his crooked nose and eyes. The man opened his mouth and more blood dripped down. This was

no normal man, obviously. This was clearly the demonic cultivator, who must be suffering from the backlash of his deviant practice.

Before he could even say a word, the maiden in white had already sped off, ignoring her injuries and lunging towards the bloodied man with her sword in hand. She spun her body to increase her momentum and slashed at the man. Yet, her attack was repelled solely by the formidable amount of resentful energy surrounding the man like a protective layer and she was thrown backwards.

Qingheng Jun changed his plan. He retracted his sword and took out his xiao instead. He made some modifications to his song, cutting the verses short in order to inflict instant damage and counter the resentful energy as quickly as possible, for the madman was now triggered and was dashing towards them instead. Qingheng Jun narrowly avoided the man's reaching fist. His eyes winced as he noticed maggots crawling out of the man's mouth as he roared, and was repulsed when he realized the man's fingers were rotting. How was it possible for this man to still be alive?

The maiden in white had gotten up back. She summoned her sword and sent it flying towards the madman but again, it was repelled. The madman roared and released an intense wave of demonic qi. Qingheng Jun nearly dropped his xiao. He gritted his teeth and raised his outer robes, which was embedded with protective charms to shield against the excruciating force. The maiden, however, was not so lucky. There were cuts on her exposed hands and blood seeping from the wound.

She coughed and spat out blood. "Should've bandaged my hands," she murmured.

The demonic cultivator pounced at the maiden and Qingheng Jun used the opportunity to stab him from the back with his xiao. The man dropped to the ground.

Qingheng Jun sighed. He rushed to the maiden and knelt by her side. "Are you okay?"

However, panic appeared in her golden eyes. "Behind you!"

“... So that was how you received the injury,” Wen Ruohan nodded.

“Based on his appearance and your words as well, it does sound like the man is not actually alive. But if so, how is the body able to move?” Lan Qiren questioned.

“It is the thing inside him that is alive and controlling everything,” Bai Yiqing explained.

“... A body possession... or a living puppet?” Wen Ruohan theorised. “Either way, both sounds dangerous.”

A living puppet? Lan Qiren felt disturbed as he remembered the living corpses that they all had to fight in the future. Hearing the word in this new timeline gave him an ominous feeling. Why had he not heard anything about this in the past? Certain things might have diverged because of his interference - like his newly formed friendship (?) with Wen Ruohan, but things that were out of his control should not change.

Like the way Qingheng Jun met his future wife. The only reasonable explanation to this was that Qingheng Jun himself had hidden the truth from him. After all, the only thing he knew about Bai Yiqing was that she was a rogue cultivator, who was caught after murdering their teacher, yet was brought home by Qingheng Jun, who claimed to fall for her at first sight and decided to marry her despite everyone's protest.

Regardless of whether it was true or not that it was love at first sight, it did not change that Qingheng Jun did love her until the end of his life - though whether she loved him back or not was unknown even to Lan Qiren. The elders punished his disobedience by imprisoning her in the gentian house, separating the two, but Qingheng Jun found his way and she gave birth to two sons. That, however, was something Lan Qiren and the other elders were forced to hide from Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji.

It was cruel of them, to separate a husband from his wife, a mother from her children, but rules were rules and she admitted to the murder. A murderer could not just be left unpunished and she took the punishment without much protest.

He looked back at the young maiden, wondering what prompted her to kill someone Lan Qiren deemed one of the most respectable figures in Gusu Lan. He wondered what made his brother fall for this woman so hard, that he was unable to let go of her.

“No matter how many times you kill it, it will continue to walk until the body is completely rotten,” Qingheng Jun said.

“Well then, that brings us to the more important question - what is inside?” Wen Ruohan said and crossed his arms. “I haven’t heard of a demonic cultivator who has the ability to possess a dead body. If what you’re saying is true, then we need to deploy cultivators with the right tools to prevent possession.”

“Gusu Lan will handle this,” Qingheng Jun said.

Wen Ruohan frowned. “We’re in the Qishan Wen jurisdiction.”

“The madman doesn’t just stay in one place. He is not the responsibility of one clan.”

“Oh, now who’s the one doing the claiming now?”

“We have the right methods and capabilities to deal with this,” Qingheng Jun said.

“Hold on,” Bai Yiqing scowled and interrupted Qingheng Jun. “This is supposed to be my problem.”

“With so many victims, how can you still say it’s a personal problem? We both know you can’t handle the demonic cultivator alone,” Qingheng Jun said.

“Ha, and look who’s injured now? The great Gusu Lan Sect Leader couldn’t handle it either, right?”

“Shall we look up the matter on our own as well, RenRen?” Wen Ruohan nudged him by the elbow.

“Wen Ruohan, we still have the Yin Iron to worry about,” Lan Qiren whispered to remind him. Considering he did not remember this event, either the demonic cultivator was handled by another sect or the case turned out to not be such a big deal. Otherwise, wouldn’t Qingheng Jun talk about it, especially since this was his first actual encounter with his future wife?

“So does the madman simply attack anyone at random?” Wen Ruohan said, already slinging his arm around Lan Qiren’s shoulders, ignoring the latter’s protest.

“Anyone who irks him, even in the slightest way,” Bai Yiqing answered. “His actions are just unpredictable, but one thing for certain is that a hint of hostility is enough to provoke him.”

“Good. I’m quite gifted in the art of offending people, if I may say so myself. Let’s split into pairs and also look for the demonic cultivator,” said Wen Ruohan.

Lan Qiren groaned. “Are we really...?”

Bai Yiqing looked uneasy but did not voice her objection this time. “As long as you two don’t get in my way.”

“No worries, we won’t, young maiden,” Wen Ruohan grinned. “More alone time with RenRen, the better-”

In hindsight, perhaps Lan Qiren should have utilized the silencing charm on the Qishan Wen heir much earlier and more often, considering it was the most effective way to shut the man up. Oh, not to mention Wen Ruohan’s face when his mouth was clamped shut was way quite an amusing sight.

Chapter End Notes

After several reading... I assume the best way to deal with the way Cangse Sanren should be addressed in dialogue is to just make up a name for her. She's not in this chapter, so I'll put her name in the next one and do the correction then. As for Mdm Lan's name, it is spelled as 白一情 (White, One Love). Since LWJ and LXC's names were taken from phrases, I took inspiration from the idiom 一见钟情 (yījiànzhōngqíng) — Love at first sight. Please correct me for any mistake ^^

I'm sure there are a lot of theories behind QHJ and Mdm Lan's past. But I quite like the take of one blog post I've read before (I forgot the name), that perhaps QHJ didn't voluntarily go into self-seclusion (at least not at first), because he didn't just have one, but two children with Mdm Lan. When QHJ and Mdm Lan's backstory was revealed, it was from LXC - someone who wasn't born at the time of the imprisonment, I assume.

...let's not fret too much, as this is ultimately a WenQi fic.

(;3 」 ∠)

PS: I've got a question for anyone familiar with Chinese language/culture. If the eldest son has assumed the title of the family head, will the second son still be called Second Young Master, or just Young Master?

Sorry for the long end note

The ghost left behind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After much deliberation, Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren decided to head to Yueyang to investigate the origin of the demonic cultivator in hopes to discover the identity of whatever Bai Yiqing claimed to be inside the madman, controlling everything. Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing meanwhile would continue chasing the demonic cultivator. They decided on Kuizhou, and Qingheng Jun sent another letter to Cloud Recess requesting for several experienced, senior disciples to do a reconnaissance in other towns, where they predicted the demonic cultivator might appear based on his previous route of travel.

Wen Ruoyu looked like he had a lot he wanted to ~~rag~~ speak to his cousin, but Wen Ruohan had dismissed him with a wave of goodbye before grabbing Lan Qiren by the waist and hopping onto his sword to fly away. Lan Qiren swore he could hear Wen Ruoyu uncharacteristically shouting profanities at Wen Ruohan. They flew together for a good ten minutes before Lan Qiren decided enough was enough, and elbowed Wen Ruohan in the solar plexus so he could fly on his own sword.

“Ouff,” Wen Ruohan groaned as they landed for a short break. “You hurt me, RenRen.”

“Say that nickname again and I will hurt you for real,” Lan Qiren threatened.

“I’m certain there’s a rule against threatening and abusing power in Cloud Recess,” Wen Ruohan whined.

“There’s also a rule against shamelessness, and I’ll be sure to add a rule prohibiting any contact against you in the future,” Lan Qiren warned.

“A good amount of shamelessness is needed in life, RenRen. Do you want some fish?” Wen Ruohan asked. He waded into the river and stabbed into the water to catch some fish without waiting for Lan Qiren’s answer.

Lan Qiren sighed. He collected a few pieces of twigs to light a campfire. Sitting down, he asked, “Is there another reason why you’re interested in the demonic cultivator?”

Wen Ruohan came back from the river with a couple of fish already gutted. He stuck the skewered fish by the fire to roast them. “You don’t find it suspicious, RenRen? I’ve never heard of a demonic cultivator with the ability to possess dead bodies.”

“Neither have I,” Lan Qiren admitted.

“Remember Xue Chonghai used the Yin Iron to manipulate resentful energy and create living puppets? It is possible that the demonic cultivator is attempting to do the same, except that he screwed up and transferred his own soul into the dead body instead. Or... well, who knows what his intention is. Anyway, there are other pieces of Yin Iron out there and we can’t let it stay in the hands of a demonic cultivator,” said Wen Ruohan.

So he was suspecting that the demonic cultivator possessed one piece of the Yin Iron. The thought did not cross Lan Qiren’s mind since he already knew the locations of each piece but it was reasonable for Wen Ruohan to think so. At this point of time he still had no idea where the rest of the pieces were. Lan Qiren could not tell him that the demonic cultivator probably did not have the piece, since he would then have to explain why he knew that.

“Where should we start?” Lan Qiren wondered.

“How about holding hands, followed by hugging and -”

“....” Lan Qiren raised his sword.

Wen Ruohan raised his two arms like admitting defeat. “Alright, alright. The first murder, I suppose. According to Maiden Bai she has been chasing the corpse for six months. One important detail that I’ve caught from your brother is that the madman was rotting, but his fingers weren’t falling off yet. He still has nails and teeth, meaning that the body is still quite new.”

“He must have switched bodies several times,” Lan Qiren decided. Demonic cultivation could ruin one’s golden core and after death, the spiritual energy could no longer circulate to keep the body young. It might decompose slower than a normal person’s, but not for long.

“The madman Maiden Bai has been chasing is just a new vessel. We can start by looking into the first vessel,” Wen Ruohan said. “It’s going to turn dark soon, should we rest here or...?”

Lan Qiren pondered. They weren’t too far from Yueyang anyway, they might as well just continue their journey and get a proper rest in a nice inn. If they were going to investigate traces of a demonic cultivator, they would need to be in good shape. “Let’s continue and get a room.”

A flirty smirk formed on Wen Ruohan’s face. “If you insist~”

“Two rooms!” Lan Qiren reiterated.

Having spent the majority of his life raising his two nephews and devoting himself to teaching young disciples, Lan Qiren rarely got the chance to actually go out on night hunts ever since the birth of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. Yueyang was not a place he often stepped his foot on to, especially since it had its own cultivation sect led by the Chang Clan. The only memories he had of this place was hearing about the mass murder committed by Xue Yang. Back then Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian suspected that Xue Yang was there to search for the Yin Iron, but they later learned that he was there for personal vengeance.

He took the lives of fifty people, women and children not spared, to pay back for one missing finger. Lan Qiren shuddered thinking of how twisted the man must have been.

They found a local inn with a tavern in Yueyang. Wen Ruohan ordered some food and several jars of drinks, ignoring the looks Lan Qiren was giving him. The friendly innkeeper brought their food and Wen Ruohan casually started a conversation.

“Is there anything big going around here lately?” Wen Ruohan said.

“Aiyah... Young Master, you look like you come from a distinguished sect, yet you haven’t heard of the story?” The innkeeper whispered, loud enough for only Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren to hear. He glanced around as if to make sure nobody else was listening. “It’s those Chang Clan ah!”

“What about the Chang Clan?” Lan Qiren asked.

“Several years ago there was an internal feud in the clan - a fight to choose the rightful heir. The former Sect Leader Chang favours his firstborn son, who was born out of wedlock with a lover but is more skilled. However everyone else wants the second son, born from Madam Chang, to be the successor. Both sons think they deserve to be the leaders, but in the end the second son won the support of the clan members. The first son left the clan and tried to start his own by recruiting some suspicious people in.”

“Suspicious people?” Lan Qiren repeated.

“What kind of people?” Wen Ruohan asked.

The innkeeper shook his head and clicked his tongue. “Tsk tsk... very horrible people if you ask me ah! Delinquents, sect deserters, thieves, all of them are a bunch of no-goods. Worst of all, nobody dared to go against them because Young Master Chang is just too strong ah. They say he and his friends have even started practicing some form of deviant cultivations. They took in orphans to sacrifice to the demons and kidnap young maidens to prey on them.”

Lan Qiren pondered to himself. That sounded shady indeed but the common folks always had a tendency to exaggerate when it came to gossip. Back when Wei Wuxian had his reputation completely smeared (it still wasn’t squeaky clean, it never was), a lot of people spread false, ridiculous stories of him kidnapping children and sacrificing virgins, when in truth he was just staying in Yiling Burial Mound planting radishes and babysitting his son.

It was possible that Young Master Chang, after losing the inheritance, was frustrated and started mixing in with the wrong group of people - like many other rebellious youths. As far

as Lan Qiren remembered, Young Master Chang wasn't actually a particularly formidable cultivator - because Lan Qiren remembered nothing remarkable about him. He might be better than Young Master Yao and Young Master Ouyang but he was nowhere near the level of the major clan heirs like Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian.

However, if there was any form of demonic cultivation involved, then it was possible that he possessed a certain level of threat. Still, wouldn't the Chang Clan do something about it?

"Deviant cultivation? Does the Chang Clan not do anything about it?" Wen Ruohan asked. It seemed like he was thinking the same thing as well.

"The Chang Clan already disowned their young master, saying they don't want anything to do with clan deserters and delinquents. The young master went mad and died not long after that, nobody heard about them anymore after that," the innkeeper said.

"How did he die?" Lan Qiren questioned.

The innkeeper scratched his head. "I don't really know ah. They say he just went mad one day and started bleeding all over, then dropped dead, just like that. The Chang Clan burned his body and the group just scattered. That's all I know," said the innkeeper.

Unfortunately that was the extent of his knowledge on the matter. He did not hear anything about a demonic arts practitioner killing civilians or cultivators chasing a madman in Yueyang. Wen Ruohan thanked the man and ordered several more jars of drink, making sure to tip the man generously.

"What do you think, RenRen?" Wen Ruohan asked while pouring a cup.

Lan Qiren thought about it. "The way he died does sound like there is some form of mishap on his cultivation. However, it could be either qi deviation out of a careless mistake, or backlash from his crooked practice."

"True. However, would the Chang Clan need to burn his corpse, if not because they were afraid of something?" Wen Ruohan pointed.

Lan Qiren nodded. "The rumours sound exaggerated but they must have a root."

"... Also, don't you find it strange?"

"What?"

"Maiden Bai. Didn't she say she has been chasing him since Yueyang?"

Lan Qiren's eyes widened. "But there were no casualties other than Young Master Chang. Which means..."

"She's hiding something from us. She couldn't have known about the madman from the get-go, unless she is somehow associated with him."

Exactly how much did Qingheng Jun hide from him? Lan Qiren was beginning to feel frustrated. Just how much happened behind the scenes that he didn't know, that led to the disasters occurring in the future?

"Don't be so mad, RenRen. It's just our assumption, Maiden Bai might have lied but she may not be a bad person," Wen Ruohan said and handed him the cup.

Lan Qiren glared at him and snatched the cup, downing it in one gulp much to the other's surprise. "My brother is with that woman and he's head over heels for her. Yet here I am, unable to do anything because it's their fate."

Wen Ruohan blinked.

Lan Qiren continued to ramble. "Why can't I do anything? I'm such a horrible... I can't..."

"... RenRen, I think I have you my cup instead of your tea. I'm sorry, let's go to our room."

Lan Qiren's face-planted himself against the table. Wen Ruohan sighed. He put some money on the table and carried his traveling companion to their room upstairs.

He carefully placed the blacked out figure onto the bed and took off his boots. Lan Qiren grunted and began turning and tossing around. Looking at the discomfort in his face, Wen Ruohan took off the outer layers of the Gusu Lan white robes, leaving Lan Qiren in only his inner robes.

"Don't get mad at me RenRen, I'm looking after you, okay?" Wen Ruohan grinned. He took off his own clothes, leaving himself to only his pants as usual before also climbing into bed.

Snuggling next to Lan Qiren, he extinguished the candle with a flick of hand and closed his eyes to sleep.

Then Lan Qiren suddenly moved and a sudden jolt of electricity rushed through Wen Ruohan as the Gusu Lan young master straddled his hips. Wen Ruohan gulped. "RenRen?"

Lan Qiren lowered his head and brought their faces close.

Lan Qiren frowned. His head hurt so much. Did the bastard, Wen Shameless Ruohan feed him alcohol again? He squinted his eyes open and grimaced as he discovered Wen Ruohan lying underneath his arms. His face looked slightly blue as if he had just been suffocated. Lan Qiren sat up.

“Why do you look like you haven’t slept all night?” Lan Qiren asked.

“RenRen, your arm strength is truly extraordinary. Do you Gusu Lan people train your arms all day?” Wen Ruohan choked out as he slowly sat up as well. His expression did not look good. “I could barely sleep a wink.”

“What did you do?”

“What did I do? You did me, what else?!” Wen Ruohan grumbled. “You have to take responsibility, RenRen. My body hurts so much.”

Lan Qiren’s face turned scarlet. “Don’t be ridiculous. What did I do?”

A shit-eating grin appeared on Wen Ruohan’s face. “Guess.”

“... Nothing worth mentioning, I see.”

“So mean, RenRen. One day you will remember and you’re going to be sorry you weren’t sober back then,” Wen Ruohan pouted.

"If you have nothing better to speak about, let's just get ready. We have things to do," said Lan Qiren.

Outside, he put on a mask of stern indifference.

Inside, he was panicking.

What the hell did he do this time? There was a reason why members of Lan Clan prohibited consumption of alcohol - they were not only genetically intolerant of it, a lot of them had the

tendency to do... things that should not be done. Like branding yourself with a hot iron brand to have the same mark as your dead soulmate.

Maybe if he pretended like nothing happened he could just erase the unsurfaced memories from his brain forever.

They ordered breakfast to be brought over to their room and discussed their next plan. Wen Ruohan suggested investigating the places where the deceased Young Master Chang used to gather with his friends. According to the innkeeper, the man was often seen coming to an old temple with his friends during the day and spending their nights drinking or gambling at a local brothel. The brothel wasn't opened yet, so they headed to the temple.

There were talismans to ward against evil plastered on the gate. A couple of Yueyang Chang disciples stood there to guard the entrance. They looked stunned and disturbed by Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren's sudden arrival.

"This place is prohibited," one of them said.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. "Is it the Chang Clan's private property?"

"No, but--"

"Then move. Unless you intend to have a go against Qishan Wen and Gusu Lan?"

The two disciples did not dare to provoke disciples from larger, stronger clans. They slowly stepped away.

Wen Ruohan huffed as he climbed up the stairs. "Now I know why the news never went beyond this city."

Lan Qiren nodded. "Yueyang Chang silenced anyone from trying to spread it. But why?"

“Either they do have the Yin Iron and are trying to keep it for themselves, or their former young master did dabble in some dark arts and they’re trying to save face,” Wen Ruohan said.

The temple building was dirty, dilapidated, and looked like it had been ransacked. There were blood stains left on the wooden floor that had been soaked into the wood. The air was thick with resentful energy, albeit probably nowhere near the severity of places like Yiling Burial Mound. There was a broken statue of the deity worshipped at the temple. The right arm was gone, and the head was barely hanging on the body.

“Well, whatever proof and tools here clearly has been taken away,” Wen Ruohan shrugged. He grinned. “But luckily our talented Young Master Lan can communicate with spirits! Can you check and ask whatever is left here?”

Lan Qiren nodded. He took out his guqin and began playing.

The instant he played the first note, he felt a strong wave of demonic energy attacking him, almost like trying to crush his body. It almost reminded him of the time he first encountered the spirit from the severed arm of Nie Mingjue. Whoever died here was bearing a very great resentment. The forceful resentful energy nearly knocked him out and Lan Qiren coughed out blood.

Wen Ruohan’s eyes widened and he rushed to cradle Lan Qiren in a panic. “RenRen!”

Lan Qiren wiped the blood off his mouth calmly. “I’m fine. Looks like whoever left here didn’t just die from a cultivating accident. It feels more like a vengeful spirit who was murdered.”

“... Can you continue? We don’t have to-”

“I’m fine,” Lan Qiren said and sat back. He closed his eyes to regain concentration and strummed another note.

“Ask his name,” Wen Ruohan suggested.

Lan Qiren played a note. The strings vibrated in response aggressively, showing how much the spirit was in turmoil. He frowned. “.... Chang Ran.”

Wen Ruohan was stunned. “Chang Ran... isn’t that the name of the dead young master?”

Lan Qiren looked at him. “Do you not expect it to be him?”

Wen Ruohan pondered for a moment. “You know... when I first heard the innkeeper’s story, I thought that perhaps the young master of Chang might have tried his hands on demonic cultivation. He died, and possessed one of his hooligan friends, and now continues looking for a new body to possess. But if his spirit is left here...”

Lan Qiren thought out loud, “The culprit is someone else. Chang Ran is the first victim. But that means his body was forcefully taken over, yet the Chang Clan...”

Realization struck the two.

“They burned the body to avoid identification,” Wen Ruohan uttered. “They claimed the dead body found was Chang Ran so whatever happened afterwards won’t be associated with them.”

That was a possible theory. However Lan Qiren did not want to jump into conclusion yet. If that was true, that meant Yueyang Chang knowingly let a mad demonic cultivator run free and slaughter innocent people just to save face. That would be just disgraceful. Lan Qiren strummed another note to question the spirit.

The spirit replied back, just as aggressive. Lan Qiren was sweating profusely. At this rate he might actually faint again. They could not stay here for too long, he had to get out as much

information as he could within limited time. "I asked if his body was taken over by his murderer. He said yes. Only two more questions."

Wen Ruohan nodded. "Ask if the one who murdered him is a demonic cultivator, and possess the Yin Iron."

There was no way he could have the Yin Iron, Lan Qiren thought. The remaining Yin Iron pieces were with Lady Florist, in Cloud Recess, in Xuanwu Cave, and one kept by Xue Yang. However, since Wen Ruohan believed it had to do with the relic, Lan Qiren decided to just ask the question.

The spirit replied back.

Lan Qiren froze.

"What did he say, RenRen?" Wen Ruohan asked.

Lan Qiren's hands trembled. No, it couldn't be. Impossible.

"RenRen?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "... He does. The person is a demonic cultivator and possesses a piece of Yin Iron."

Wen Ruohan's eyes widened. "His name?"

Lan Qiren shut his eyes once again, concentrating his energy for the one final question.

Raging melody reverberated through the guqin strings as the spirit responded.

Lan Qiren opened his eyes. He uttered the name before collapsing in Wen Ruohan's arms.

"Xue Yanzi."

"Second Young Master Lan sure takes his time, huh," Nie Yizhou commented.

"I wonder if he's safe," Jiang Fengmian wondered. "What do you think, Changze?"

Wei Changze hummed. "He should be safe."

"So who's this Second Young Master Lan you guys have been talking about?" Cangse Sanren asked.

"He's around the same age as us. He's the current Sect Leader, Qingheng Jun's younger brother," Jiang Fengmian explained.

"Is he any fun or is he also like most of the Lan disciples here?"

Nie Yizhou rolled his eyes. "So far only Wei Changze thinks he's a good company."

"Maybe because A Ze is also a fellow fuddy duddy," Cangse Sanren cheekily teased.

Wei Changze found it absolutely ridiculous that he now had to sit beside his apparently future wife by this river, because the one inviting Cangse Sanren to join them fishing at the back mountains was none other than Jiang Fengmian, his best friend who had a crush on him. The more Jiang Fengmian expressed his interest in her, the more Wei Changze was feeling guilty.

Strangely enough even though Jiang Fengmian was making more effort to approach her, she kept trying to get closer to him. She kept teasing him, yes, but she also barely initiated any conversation with the Yunmeng Jiang heir. Wei Changze was sure he had done all he could to not only avoid her as much as possible, but to also show much he had little interest in her.

It seemed to backfire him, as the harder he tried to push, the stronger she tried to pull. When talking to him didn't work, she did all sorts of ridiculous things to gain his attention, like the other day when she lured him all the way to Caiyi Town by picking a fight with him. Just yesterday, when her punishment was done, she made another careless remark and Wei Changze was forced to oversee her punishment again.

"A Ze?" Jiang Fengmian repeated and Wei Changze felt even more disturbed, because not even Jiang Fengmian would address him so affectionately like that. "Since when did the two of you become so close?"

Cangse Sanren pouted. "I'm trying. A Ze is just too cold."

Nie Yizhou sneered. "He's never this cold with anyone. Maybe he actually likes you."

A mischievous smile appeared on Cangse Sanren's face. "Oho? Is our Wei Gege secretly a shy, inexperienced young maiden? Should I call you Wei Meimei instead?"

Wei Changze was about to retort, but paused when he spotted several senior Lan cultivators gathering at the gazebo not far from where they were fishing. An elder came to speak to the senior disciples. It seemed like whatever he was gathering them for must be an urgent matter, as the disciples all moved in a rush after receiving the brief order.

"Changze?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

"I wonder if there's something happening out there. Qingheng Jun still hasn't returned from the conference. Second Young Master Lan also isn't coming back. All the senior disciples look like they're in a rush to head out, even though they just returned from a night hunt," Wei Changze thought out loud.

"There probably is something. I saw one of the elders going out last night. Why would he break the curfew if not because there is something serious?" Cangse Sanren said.

Wei Changze nodded. "I'm worried. I wonder if Lan Qiren..." he paused, then looked at Cangse Sanren. "You saw him last night? Did you sneak out again?"

"... Oops?"

Chapter End Notes

They ended up in one room and one bed after all

(7 「ε:)♥_(:3 」 ∠)_

You're not allowed to go

Chapter Notes

So I edited the previous chapters and added CSSR's courtesy name, 亮星宿 (Liang Xingxiu), meaning Bright Constellation, sharing the same character, Xing, as Xiao Xingchen, just to show their martial relations. The name will only be used in dialogues though, in narrative I'm still using CSSR.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wei Changze almost flinched when Cangse Sanren suddenly yelled. “Alright, I can’t stand this anymore!”

He frowned, then looked at the paper on the desk. “You’ve only copied halfway through. There are 47 more to go.”

“This is pointless. Elder Lan is out and hasn’t returned. Qingheng Jun is out and also hasn’t returned. Even his little brother has been absent for days. Don’t you think something is going on out there?” Cangse Sanren questioned.

Wei Changze nodded. There was no doubt that there was some sort of a troubling case out there. The senior disciples of Gusu Lan had just returned for a couple of days from their night hunt, yet they were sent out on another mission again, with minimal rest. Moreover, Gusu Lan did not just send their senior disciples, but also one of their elders. Elder Lan Fan, who was seen going out the other day, had not been to night hunts for years, as he had taken up teaching in classrooms.

He was one of Qingheng Jun and Lan Qiren’s uncles as well as their teacher. While his cultivation talent was not as remarkable as Qingheng Jun, he was very knowledgeable in demons and had spent years studying the arts of defense against demons and resentful energy. He had even composed some of the musical pieces utilized by Gusu Lan disciples. Sending such a valuable member of the sect only meant that either Qingheng Jun or Lan Qiren were facing something very troublesome.

“It’s still not our place to do anything,” said Wei Changze.

Cangse Sanren smirked. “Says who?”

He looked at her pointedly.

“The elders are all busy. The senior disciples are absent. The Sect Leader and his brother aren’t around. That means... there’s nobody to keep an eye on us, or punish us,” she said with a glint in her eyes.

“What would we even do?” Wei Changze questioned.

“Investigate, what else? There are no more valuable lessons than a practical class! Let’s go on a night hunt together, A Ze!” She suggested.

Wei Changze was tempted. However he could not just do anything as he pleased. He was here to study, not to cause any trouble. If something were to happen to him while he was outside without permission, he would only trouble Jiang Fengmian and Yunmeng Jiang.

Cangse Sanren noticed the hesitant look in his face and rolled her eyes. “Ah, I see, thinking about your friend again? This is why I’d hate living in sects and clans. So many unnecessary restrictions!”

“The restrictions come with the benefits,” Wei Changze said.

She hummed and crossed her arms. “So if I ask Young Master Jiang to join us there’d be no problem, right?”

“Maiden Liang -”

She already rose from her seat. "I'm going to look for him."

"Wait-" He clicked his tongue and grabbed her wrist. "Don't force me to use the binding talismans again."

She grinned at him, almost like challenging him. "What would you do if I still go? How tight are you going to tie me up, Wei Gege?"

He stared at her sharply. "I'll make sure you can never escape me, ever."

Cangse Sanren's face turned red. To Wei Changze, it seemed like she must have been angered by his threat.

Unknown to him, in Cangse Sanren's head, inappropriate thoughts began filling her mind. His sharp stare and deep voice were sending her images that could make even married people blush. She began picturing the young man pressing her against the desk and passionately taking her then and there, never letting her go even as she begged for mercy. Oh, just thinking about it was making her feel unbearably heated up. What would Wei Changze think if he knew she was harbouring all these perverted thoughts about him?

Luckily her dirty train of thoughts was halted when Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian actually came to the library. They brought in some news - a good news and a possibly bad news.

"Teacher Lan is also going out tomorrow, so we have a whole three days of freedom," Nie Yizhou reported.

"First the Elder who Maiden Liang saw, now Teacher Lan is also not around? Very suspicious," Jiang Fengmian said.

"See, A Ze? That's why I said we should go out and investigate!" She beamed.

“We don’t know from where to start,” Wei Changze said.

"Lucky for us I've got a clue. I just found out that the matchmaking that my father wanted to arrange for me was postponed because the merchants who were supposed to deliver our things were attacked," said Nie Yizhou.

"Matchmaking?!" Jiang Fengmian was surprised.

The Qinghe Nie rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "He heard about Jin Guangshan going to blind dates and decided to look for a bride for me too. My father ordered some high quality silk from Jinlan City to prepare for it. Anyway, it seemed like a madman had killed the merchants driving the cart. The timing fits, don't you think?"

Jiang Fengmian hummed. "Should we go out and see, then?"

“We should!” Cangse Sanren cheered. “I’m sick of eating like rabbits!”

“Alright, it’s decided. Let’s go and look into this case. I’m also curious to see the strength of Baoshan Sanren’s disciple,” Nie Yizhou grinned.

The four young cultivators made their preparations and set out the following day.

Wen Ruohan insisted that they should go back to the inn and get some rest. However, Lan Qiren did not want to waste anymore time. It felt almost as if the missing puzzles, the frayed strings, were starting to connect now. At one glance all of the incidents may not seem related, but now Lan Qiren understood that as long as there was a common point, there would always be a relation, no matter how small.

“I’m fine,” Lan Qiren grumbled. “Put me down.”

Truthfully he had only collapsed for a mere two seconds but Wen Ruohan kept insisting on carrying him. The weird looks Yueyang Chang cultivators were giving them when they exited the temple made Lan Qiren want to find a hole and bury himself in it. At least it was a piggyback instead of a bridal carry, otherwise Lan Qiren wouldn't be able to live anymore.

"I'll find you a healer-"

"The only healer around here would be associated with Yueyang Chang Sect and we can't trust them," Lan Qiren declined.

Wen Ruohan pursed his lips. He carried Lan Qiren to a secluded place near a river and placed him there. "At least let me help you stabilize, then."

Lan Qiren took a deep breath. "Fine," he said and handed his wrist.

Wen Ruohan examined his condition and supplied more qi to help accelerate his recovery. He sighed. "I'm sorry. I should have known that any spirit residing in that place won't be easy."

"You're not responsible for any of this. Most importantly, this case..."

"... Is going to be a lot harder than we thought. According to the spirit of Chang Ran, the one who murdered and possessed his body is a demonic cultivator called Xue Yanzi, who possesses a piece of Yin Iron. Though, this man will keep changing bodies and we don't know what happened to Xue Yanzi's original body," Wen Ruohan said.

Was it be taken by the Chang Clan, along with the Yin Iron? In his original timeline the grown up Xue Yang, who at this time shouldn't be born yet, allegedly went to retrieve the Yin Iron from Yueyang Chang Clan. However, according to Wei Wuxian his appearance there was just to solve a personal grudge, nothing to do with the Yin Iron at all. How the piece ended up in his hands, remained a mystery. Supposedly Xue Yang and Xue Yanzi were related just because of their surname, it still did not make much sense since Xue Yang was a

street boy. How was he able to keep something so precious in his possession for years? An impoverished orphan would have exchanged it for food.

"We've got the gist of how it happened, at least," Wen Ruohan said.

"Only on the surface. We still don't know who Xue Yanzi is, why he has the Yin Iron, and how much Chang Ran is involved with him," Lan Qiren said.

Wen Ruohan frowned. "I thought we already established that he's a demonic cultivator and that Young Master Chang just mingled with troublesome people?"

"That's what the villagers said. We can't just blindly believe in gossip."

"RenRen, you're very thoughtful."

He wasn't. He just learned from experience. Xue Yanzi could be growing radish and still be called a demonic cultivator if he had done something distasteful even once.

Wen Ruohan patted his thighs. "Alright, lie down, RenRen. We have a few hours until the brothel is open, get some rest and I'll watch."

Lan Qiren grimaced. Was he seriously offering him to lay on his lap? His shamelessness kept escalating day by day. Lan Qiren laid his head on the grass instead. It wasn't the ideal place to lay down but renting a room for a few hours of rest was a waste and it wasn't like he had never slept outside.

"RenRen, what do you think of this?"

"I have no idea. We just have to wait until we can get more information from the brothel," Lan Qiren sighed. He really wished he didn't have to go to that kind of place, but investigation took more priority over pride. "Hopefully it won't take too long."

Wen Ruohan grinned. “The girls in Yueyang may not be as sweet as Gusu, but they’re not too bad, RenRen.”

Lan Qiren glared at him. “If you like them so much, why don’t you stay here forever then?”

Wen Ruohan returned his glare with a mischievous smile. “I like you better, so can I stay with you?”

Blood rushed to colour his cheeks scarlet and he quickly turned his face. “Scram!”

Wen Ruohan only laughed. Lan Qiren shut his eyes and tried to calm himself. For some reason his heart won’t stop beating fast. It was probably trying to pump faster to recover back all the blood he coughed up earlier. Yup, that had to be the only explanation.

Night came and they set off to find the brothel. Lan Qiren did not quite get a proper nap but Wen Ruohan had helped speed up his recovery by channeling plenty of his own spiritual energy, that Lan Qiren had to stop him, lest he’d be the one fainting next.

A brothel wasn't a place Lan Qiren would willingly visit. Promiscuity was not tolerated after all and he was never interested in seeking comfort or pleasures from strangers. Like normal men he felt pent up too at times, but he would simply either meditate, recite the rules, or head over to the Cold Pond. There were times he might have relieved himself, but... well, the point was, he never sought for anything in brothels, other than information.

An unacceptable place it was for Gusu Lan, but he couldn't deny it held plenty of valuable information. It was said that Young Master Chang and his friends used to frequent this particular brothel, though it was more to seek musical entertainment and for gambling rather than to spend the night with the courtesans. Wen Ruohan requested for a meal in a private room with one of the top paid courtesans, the same woman who used to entertain Young Master Chang and his group of friends.

The food arrived, along with the courtesan who introduced herself as Madam Hua. She was beautiful, though not as young as the other courtesans. She was however very well-mannered and polite, with clear experience judging from the way she maintained a certain distance from them - knowing their background - while still appearing friendly. "It's rare for young masters from esteemed clans to come to our establishment," she said with a pleasant smile.

"A small place this is, but it's nice," Wen Ruohan casually remarked.

"Hua Er thank Young Master Wen," she bowed.

"I heard the late Young Master Chang used to frequent this place with his friends," Wen Ruohan began. Lan Qiren was a little surprised that he didn't bother exchanging more pleasantries.

Madam Hua fell silent for a moment. She poured two cups for her guests. Lan Qiren ignored the drink in favour of focusing his attention to her - and to avoid getting drunk, of course. He could see grief in her eyes. It seemed like she was quite close, possibly fond of them, to be this attached to her clients.

"Young Master Chang indeed used to come here with his friends. They would play card games all night while listening to music," she said.

"I've heard that his friends are criminals. Does the authority not do anything about it? It seems as if it's a common knowledge that they spend their nights here," Wen Ruohan asked.

Madam Hua gasped. "They aren't criminals!"

Lan Qiren frowned. "What do you mean?"

Madam Hua's shoulders shrank a little. "It is true that they do not have the best reputation. However, Young Master Chang and his friends have never actually been arrested other than

for making loud noises or fighting with the other patrons. Even then, it's usually to defend our little sisters who were mistreated by violent, drunk patrons."

"Who are they, then?" Lan Qiren asked.

Madam Hua frowned as she tried to recall it. "Hua Er isn't very knowledgeable about their past either. What Hua Er knows is that two of them were also disciples of Yueyang Chang who left with Young Master Chang. Then there is a rogue cultivator from Anping with his two disciples, as well as a local delinquent."

"Disciples? How old are they?" Wen Ruohan asked. "The rogue has disciples?"

"Perhaps as young as you two young masters? They are all fairly young, none over thirty save for the rogue cultivator. I believe the rogue is collecting disciples to start his own sect. They occasionally go around recruiting potential young talents, though they've only been taking in orphans," Madam Hua explained.

Her story matched with the innkeeper - that Chang Ran and his friends were planning to create a new sect. That would explain the rumour of 'kidnapping children and sacrificing virgins', Lan Qiren thought. A talented cultivator deciding to start their own sect was not something unusual, though whether they succeed or not was a different story. If they were unmarried or without family, then most would start by recruiting people who were in similar situations. How did it evolve into rumors of demonic cultivators and criminals kidnapping people, though? Or did the Chang Clan purposely badmouth Chang Ran and his friends out of revenge and hatred, to stop Chang Ran from creating a stronger new sect that could threaten their influence?

"Is there anyone named Xue Yanzi among them?" Wen Ruohan asked.

"... There might be. They've only referred to each other by nicknames but I believe one of the disciples from Anping was called A Xue," she recalled. "He was very handsome, with a radiant smile and a boyish charm."

"Radiant smile, huh. I bet he's popular with the ladies," Wen Ruohan teased and poured a cup for Madam Hua. Lan Qiren's eyes twitched a little as he saw it.

The courtesan giggled. "Oh, he is! It's too bad he was already taken."

"Taken?"

"So what happened to them after Young Master Chang passed? Did they continue to look for other members?" Lan Qiren asked, not caring about more gossip. They knew Xue Yanzi was the one to have killed him, but they had no inkling about the fate of the rest, especially the rogue master.

"Young Master Chang holds the funds. The rogue has no money, he can't start a proper sect or raise children without Young Master Chang's help. After Young Master Chang's passing, I heard that the Chang Clan seized back everything he owned including the house he inherited, and kicked out all the children who were staying there. Some of them were captured by slave traders, very heartless, peii!" She cursed.

It was understandable why she was mad. The Chang Clan wasn't the wealthiest, but they weren't poor and they definitely had more than enough to eat. They disowned Young Master Chang, but took the house he lived in, with the excuse that the house was a gift from the Old Master Chang to his lover, who was Chang Ran's mother. There was no loss in letting the poor orphaned children stay there, yet they not only claimed the house but even abandoned the orphans.

"The rogue and his two disciples? The delinquent? Nobody took the children in?" Lan Qiren questioned.

"They were never seen again. The group was scattered and gone just like that," said Madam Hua. It appeared that just like the innkeeper, Madam Hua too wasn't aware about the murder and thought the only body retrieved was Young Master Chang's.

"... So where did the rumours of demonic cultivation come from?" Lan Qiren wondered.

"This humble servant isn't familiar with such things, but from what I've heard, the rogue cultivator indeed practiced a cultivation method different from others," Madam Hua admitted. "I'm not sure what happened but not long before Young Master Chang's demise, the group had a falling out."

"Why?"

"The one called A Xue and Young Master Chang were fighting, I believe, over a woman. The female disciple who was with A Xue - I believe Young Master Chang was attracted to her. It was terrible - the whole room was in a mess, they broke the table and left without paying. That was the last time they came here, and a few days later we heard the news that Young Master Chang had died," she explained.

Unfortunately there was not much more that Madam Hua could tell them. Lan Qiren however could piece together some of the information. There were seven people in the group. Three of them were from Anping - the rogue master, the female disciple, and Xue Yanzi. Three were from Chang Clan - Chang Ran and his two closest friends. One was a delinquent. They were misfits, gathered together to form a place they could belong to. Unfortunately an argument somehow resulted in Xue Yanzi killing Chang Ran, then later possessing different bodies and going on rampage killing innocent people. As for why he chose to possess Chang Ran's body, that was still a mystery - it could be a mistake in cultivating, or he was indeed testing the Yin Iron's ability but had a mishap. Oh, add that he was a practitioner of demonic cultivation...

... Hm? Wouldn't that mean the rogue was possibly also a demonic cultivator passing down his crooked teachings to the disciples?

"Do you know their names?" Wen Ruohan asked.

"They call the master 'Shifu', and only that. The delinquent was called Xiao Wu, I do not believe it was his real name either," she said.

"Have you heard of anyone named Bai Yiqing then?"

“The female disciple, perhaps? A Xue always called her Shijie, but I’ve heard Young Master Chang call her Maiden Bai plenty of times,” Madam Hua recounted. “I thought that was also a nickname, since she’s often dressed in all white.”

“...”

Shit. That was Bai Yiqing. The maiden who was part of the group - that was his future sister-in-law all along! Did that mean... was his sister-in-law also a deviant cultivator?!

In the end they went back to the same inn they stayed the previous night, before finally setting out the following morning. Traveling at night wasn’t too ideal unless they were actually looking for demons and resentful beings. They were both not in their optimal condition and their target was a demonic cultivator strong enough to inflict injuries on the esteemed Qingheng Jun, they had to be careful.

“You look so grumpy, RenRen. That’s not good for you. See, you’re so stressed you’re starting to grow some hairs here,” Wen Ruohan said, reaching for the stray hairs on his chin with his fingers.

Lan Qiren glared at him. He just discovered that his future sister-in-law was potentially a deviant cultivator, or at least learned from one. The preference for the crooked ones seemed to run in the family, considering Lan Wangji married that rascal Wei Wuxian, and Lan Xichen was bosom buddies with that snake Jin Guangyao. Well, Qingheng Jun should be safe - he survived long enough to marry her. She gave birth to his two sons and showed affections to them.

He pushed Wen Ruohan’s hand away. “It’s a beard, growing out naturally. How can I not worry, my brother is out with a woman who might have learned some crooked arts, chasing another guy also a practitioner of the deviant path.”

“A beard, at this age? I don’t like it RenRen, I prefer feeling your smooth skin,” Wen Ruohan complained.

Lan Qiren spluttered. “You speak as if I’m letting you touch my face. Behave!”

“So where are we going?” Wen Ruohan changed the topic.

“Let’s meet up with them at Kuizhou,” Lan Qiren suggested. He paused. “The path that we’re going to have to take is going to be close to Qishan Wen’s ground, though. Will you be fine? Will your family suspect anything?”

“They don’t know I have the Yin Iron, no worries. Besides, I’m with you,” Wen Ruohan winked.

“What can I do against an entire sect?”

“Knowing that RenRen is with me is good enough.”

Lan Qiren really could not understand this man. Anyway, he just hoped that they wouldn't actually encounter any of the Qishan Wen disciples. This time instead of flying they decided to hitchhike a ride from a merchant on his oxcart to draw as little attention as possible.

The oxcart did not go as far as Kuizhou. The two cultivators thanked the merchant and traveled the rest on foot. They stopped by a teahouse for a short break. There were not many customers, though the teahouse owner appeared to have immediately recognized Wen Ruohan and was quick to serve him drinks.

“Do you think by now, Xue Yanzi might have switched to a new vessel again?” He asked.

Lan Qiren nodded. “Possibly. He was growing maggots according to Xiongzhong. Since he went on a killing spree more frequently, perhaps he is looking for a new body to inhabit?”

"How will we be able to find him if he's moved on to a new, living body? Unless there's a tool we can use..."

Zidian could do that, Lan Qiren thought. Except that they would have to whip every single suspect, and he wasn't sure how they were going to recruit a young Yu Ziyuan to join their special mission.

"I wonder how much of his consciousness as a normal human is retained."

"If he is normal. The sequence of events that we hear from two accounts matches up but their personalities contradict. The innkeeper speaks of Chang Ran and his friends as completely evil, going as far as calling them criminals. The courtesan speaks of them as nothing but a bunch of loud rebellious people. The Chang Clan went to the extent of disowning their young master," Lan Qiren sighed.

Wen Ruohan hummed, looking at his teacup. "Well, look at the people who spoke, RenRen. The courtesan could have been a slave sold to the brothel. She is forced to sleep with strangers to survive and has experienced worse things in life. Her way of thinking would not be the same as an innkeeper with a secure bag."

"Even if they were talking about the same people?"

"You also have to remember Young Master Chang likely doesn't interact much with that innkeeper compared to the courtesan. I'm inclined to believe the rumors were exaggerated."

"Or your cousin was right, that thing does influence people's emotions. Once this is over, we need to think about how to deal with that thing," Lan Qiren pointed.

"That thing?"

"The thing inside your clothes. That powerful, hard object."

“Well, there are two powerful things underneath my clothes, one is always hard and the other gets hard when-”

Lan Qiren blushed furiously. “Wen Ruohan!”

“Shixiong!”

The two travelers turned their heads to the voice interrupting their conversation. Apparently their luck was not good this time, for three men in Qishan Wen robes appeared at the teahouse. They stepped in and greeted them. Lan Qiren frowned. Here he thought they could avoid Qishan Wen cultivators.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. “Did someone send you after me?”

“Apologies, but your search has taken too long, Sect Leader refuses to wait any longer.”

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “What could I’ve done? If he can’t be found, then he can’t be found.”

"That-"

“If you have nothing else to say, go back. I’ll return once I’m done with my business.”

“Your father has summoned you back home,” the Wen disciples relayed.

“Oh, is father giving up? That’s rare,” Wen Ruohan commented.

“He ordered other people to resume the search. You are to return home and meet your fiancée.”

Lan Qiren dropped his teacup. It clattered on the table.

“Fiancée? I didn’t hear anything about this,” Wen Ruohan scowled. "Father has not brought up marriage to me."

“He found a proper woman from a well-known family. You have been ordered to come back and assume your duty as the clan heir.”

Before Wen Ruohan could even open his mouth to reply, Lan Qiren had grabbed his hand. "You can't go!"

Wen Ruohan's eyes widened.

Lan Qiren couldn't believe he almost forgot about this. Qingheng Jun had met Bai Yiqing, which meant Lan Xichen would be born in a few years. Meaning Nie Mingjue who was only a little older than Lan Xichen was also about to be born in a couple years. Meaning Wen Xu, who was around the same age as Nie Mingjue should also be born soon, and Wen Ruohan was to be married.

"You... you're not allowed to get married with any woman!" Lan Qiren found himself uttering those words before he could think of anything more appropriate to say.

Shock painted Wen Ruohan's face. It slowly morphed into a pleased smile as he gripped back on Lan Qiren's hand. "Who should I marry then? A man?"

Chapter End Notes

WRH: RenRen is proposing, and he's sober this time. (๑°˘˘°๑)•*♡

Accidental child acquisition

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan Qiren wondered since when his brain to mouth filter stopped working. Right, ever since Wei Changze planted that stupid idea to seduce the enemy into their camp. Right now if Lan Qiren had to name his number one enemy, it wouldn't be Qishan Wen, but the Wei Family. From the father, to mother, to son, all of them had been a bane to his existence! He pushed Lan Qiren to befriend this man, and now Lan Qiren had humiliated himself in front of everyone, by alluding that Wen Ruohan should not get married to anyone but him.

"Tell me, if I am not allowed to marry any woman, should I marry a man? Which man?" Wen Ruohan grinned.

The Wen disciples were watching. The teahouse sisters were watching. The other customers were watching. Lan Qiren's face turned as red as a tomato and he bolted out of the teahouse. He could not withstand this!

He could hear a loud amused laugh as Wen Ruohan ran after him. "Don't follow me!" Lan Qiren yelled.

"Ah, but RenRen, we are travelling buddies! How can you leave me alone like that?"

"Scram!" He needed to find a hole to bury himself right now! That was more humiliating than waking up to his beard shaved!

"What, you don't want your sword?"

He paused. He could not believe he even left his spiritual sword when he sprinted away. Lan Qiren was ashamed as he thought about how he had pulled a Jin Zixuan move earlier - running away after an embarrassing moment. This was just... so unlike himself. He should have just kept his cool but for some reason, in front of Wen Ruohan, he just could not feign indifference or hide his emotions. He gritted his teeth as he uncharacteristically stomped over to Wen Ruohan to grab his sword. However the smiling man held his sword up, away from his reach. "Answer me first, RenRen, who should I marry?"

"Nobody! A shameless man like you shouldn't marry at all!" Lan Qiren seethed.

"Hmm," Wen Ruohan smirked and finally handed him the sword. He was pleased to see the crimson shade coloring Lan Qiren's cheeks and ears. However if he teased the younger man any longer Lan Qiren would probably be coughing out blood again. "Alright, alright. If RenRen doesn't want me to marry a woman, I won't marry. Okay?"

Lan Qiren took the sword. He fell silent for a moment, then looked back at Wen Ruohan. "Really?"

Wen Ruohan cupped his face with his own hands. His shoulders were shaking from trying to stifle his own laugh. He already knew this side of Lan Qiren, but he wondered if Lan Qiren himself knew how adorable he was now. How could Wen Ruohan actually leave him to go on a matchmaking with a stranger? He would rather stay with Lan Qiren now and take the punishment later. "You have to stop teasing me like this RenRen, my poor heart can't take it."

"Who's teasing you?!"

Wen Ruohan peeked at Lan Qiren between his fingers. "So you weren't joking? Good."

"Wha-"

Taking one hand and bringing it to his lips for a light touch, Wen Ruohan smiled. "Better mark your words, RenRen. You've done it again, really."

"Ridiculous," Lan Qiren huffed and cleared his throat. He pulled his hand away and took a deep breath. "Is it really fine for you to ignore an order like that, though? Won't your father get suspicious?"

Wen Ruohan waved his hand off. "It's not the first time I've disobeyed him, no worries. We have more important things to do now, right?"

"The demonic cultivator," Lan Qiren sighed. That was going to be the source of their headache for now.

"Right? So let's get going before they catch me," said Wen Ruohan.

Lan Qiren glanced at him. "You said you're not going to be in trouble."

"I didn't pay the bills earlier."

"... Wen Ruohan!!!"

They didn't get to fill their tummy at the teahouse earlier and as much as Lan Qiren wanted to return to pay, Wen Ruohan assured him that the Wen disciples earlier probably had paid for their tea and uneaten dumplings. They stopped by a small village right before Kuizhou and found a small tavern. Wen Ruohan asked for a room and ordered some dishes for the two of them. By now Lan Qiren had given up trying to get two rooms. The man would still climb up his bed even if there were two beds.

"Are you two young masters cultivators?" The young waiter asked.

"Do you recognize our sects?" Lan Qiren asked. Ever since the establishment of clan-based sects, small villages like this often were unnoticed and didn't have much contact with

cultivators, since they usually reside in big cities. Just like Huanying Village, unless someone sent letters asking for help, cultivators would not be around immediately.

That was why when Jin Guangyao established the watch towers, he received so much respect from the common people. Nobody had thought that the man who seemed so caring of the plights of the needy ones was capable of something so cruel. Lan Qiren, after dealing with Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangyao, knew now. There was just no such thing as completely black and white. If things could easily be distinguished as black and white, good and evil, life wouldn't be this difficult.

"You two look like cultivators. We just had cultivators coming here a few months ago," said the waiter.

"Do you know which sect they're from?" Wen Ruohan asked.

The waiter shook his head. "We're not familiar with cultivators enough to recognize which sect they come from. They seem to be looking for an escaped demonic cultivator, though."

"Are they dressed in white?" Lan Qiren asked, just in case.

The waiter shook his head. He frowned. "No, I think they were wearing... grey?"

Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren exchanged curious looks. That was the colour of the Chang Clan. Of course, it could have been other sects as well - grey was a common colour. However, they could not deny the possibility that the Chang Clan was going around trying to erase any relations they had with the deceased young master who allegedly had attempted demonic cultivation. Either that, or they were aware about the Yin Iron and was trying to locate the piece.

"Did they say anything about the demonic cultivator? We are also looking for him. Our people have been attacked," Wen Ruohan said.

The waiter tried recalling it. "They did mention they were looking for a young man in his twenties. He has with him several children, whom he kidnapped to be sacrificed. We haven't seen anyone like that, though."

Wen Ruohan thanked the waiter. The waiter brought them their food and as soon as there were no more other souls in their vicinity, Lan Qiren turned to Wen Ruohan with a serious face. "Do you think that was Xue Yanzi they were looking for?"

Wen Ruohan shrugged. "I doubt it. He's not coherent enough, he's just a living corpse constantly looking for people to murder and new body to possess at this point. Bai Yiqing is also travelling alone. At this point that only leaves either the rogue master or the delinquent."

"Also, they kicked out the children, but now they're looking for them?" Lan Qiren thought out loud.

"Correction. They kicked out the children - presumably. The children didn't get sold, they escaped with one of the surviving members. Or they were rescued after they were sold," said

Wen Ruohan.

"He retrieved the children. I wonder why," Lan Qiren said.

"Like Madam Hua said, they may not be as evil as they're painted to be. They could have genuinely cared for the children. Anyway, it's not easy for an adult to escape with a bunch of children. Maybe if we also look for them, we'll be able to look for the surviving guys," said Wen Ruohan.

"The Chang Clan couldn't find them months ago, can we find them?" Lan Qiren questioned. The possibility of finding someone who had not only been missing months ago was already low, even more when the person was trying to hide and most importantly, they had no idea what the person looked like.

"Except that the Chang Clan is pretty useless. You and I, with the power of love, can do anything," Wen Ruohan said and grinned as he grabbed Lan Qiren's hand.

The younger man blushed furiously and shook off his hand. "Ridiculous."

Wen Ruohan laughed.

That night, while Lan Qiren was in the bath, Wen Ruohan began undressing himself, and sat down on the bed as he recalled that night in Yueyang.

...Flashback...

Wen Ruohan already knew alcohol was prohibited in Cloud Recess but he never understood why. Now he knew better. If all the Lan Clan members were like Lan Qiren, then giving them any alcohol was definitely a bad idea, a single cup was all it took to knock them down. He carried Lan Qiren all the way to their room and helped to take off his companion's clothes so the man could sleep better.

"Don't get mad at me RenRen, I'm looking after you, okay?" Wen Ruohan grinned. He took off his own clothes, leaving himself to only his pants as usual before also climbing into bed.

Snuggling next to Lan Qiren, he extinguished the candle with a flick of hand and closed his eyes to sleep. It had been a long and tiring day, and tomorrow was going to be even more tiring.

Then Lan Qiren suddenly moved and a sudden jolt of electricity rushed through Wen Ruohan as the Gusu Lan young master straddled his hips. Wen Ruohan gulped. "RenRen?"

Lan Qiren lowered his head and brought their faces close. He narrowed his eyes. "... Wen Ruohan," he mumbled.

By the way Lan Qiren's eyes appeared to be cloudy and unfocused, Wen Ruohan knew the man was still drunk. "Alright, RenRen, you're still drunk," he said and pushed the man away slightly.

"Not drunk," Lan Qiren murmured.

"That's what a drunk man would say. Now lie down-" before Wen Ruohan could even finish his sentence, Lan Qiren had placed his fingers against his lips to silence him. Wen Ruohan could not even speak. Under nothing but the shine of the moonlight, Lan Qiren's beauty was enhanced and the way his ink black hair fell down in a cascade made him look ethereal.

"Future... what do you think?" Lan Qiren asked.

Wen Ruohan frowned. "What about the future?" He was starting to get a little... uncomfortable, with the way Lan Qiren was sitting on his hips. It wasn't because of disgust or dislike - and that was the problem. When a beauty was straddling him like this, how could he not get excited? How was he going to deal with the way his heart was beating erratically?

"Are you going to follow the same route?"

"... What route?" Wen Ruohan was even more confused.

"... Have children... ruin everything?"

What would having children have anything to do with ruining everything? What was he going to ruin by spreading his genes? By adding more to Lan Qiren's headache? "What do you mean by that? Are you saying... you don't want me to have children?"

He only said it as a joke, to tease Lan Qiren. He was expecting the other to hit him, to glare at him, to retort with another 'get lost' again. He did not expect for Lan Qiren to suddenly nod, lean down to get their faces close again, then whisper;

"You're not allowed to have children."

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. Was that a threat to crush his manhood? "Oh, and how are you going to do that?"

Lan Qiren drunkenly nodded, seeming content. "Mm. Two men can't have children. You and I - we are two men."

Wen Ruohan's body went stiff, while his mind catapulted off to somewhere.

A rare, small smile had appeared on Lan Qiren's face. "You... come to Gusu with me. Come with me, and stay forever. No more trouble."

Before he knew it, he was blushing. All in his life, he had always been fairly popular with the ladies, but never once was he proposed to this boldly. Never once had his heart flutter and

race because of another person. Wen Ruohan parted his lips. Flirtatious words that usually flowed out so smoothly from his mouth now stuck in his throat, as he croaked, “RenRen... are you speaking the truth? Are you serious?”

Lan Qiren cupped his face, then pinched his cheeks. His eyes looked back into Wen Ruohan’s. “Lying is forbidden,” he whispered.

With that single sentence, Wen Ruohan felt as if his breath was taken away. He raised his hand and pressed his cold palm against Lan Qiren’s warm cheek. Their faces now just an inch apart, so close that they could feel each other’s body heat.

Wen Ruohan exhaled. “RenRen-”

He closed his eyes and tilted his head up.

He could feel it. The lightest touch brushing against his lips.

Then fingers pressing onto his acupuncture point and turning his entire body stiff, unable to move.

Wen Ruohan opened his eyes. He gawked as his body was suspended in the motion, refusing to abide by his own command. “RenRen... RenRen! What are you doing, hurry up and release me!”

“Sleep,” Lan Qiren replied sternly before collapsing and dozing off instantly.

As if he did not just ask Wen Ruohan to come and stay with him forever. As two men, in a relationship where people would normally have children. What else could that be, if not a marriage proposal?!

“So cruel, RenRen...” Wen Ruohan whined as he was stuck in the position for the rest of the night.

Then Lan Qiren tossed and turned. His arm landed right on Wen Ruohan’s chest, nearly knocking the breath out of him. Wen Ruohan could barely sleep a wink that night, his body in pain from the arm across his chest and his movement sealed, while his mind busy replaying Lan Qiren’s words.

Giving him honey, then following it with bitter root... wasn’t this too harsh?

...Flashback ends...

Lan Qiren seemed to have forgotten what he had said that night, the following morning when Wen Ruohan casually brought it up. Either that, or his sobriety returned in exchange of his boldness and he was too embarrassed to admit it. Wen Ruohan was just going to let it go. It hurt a little, but he could not really hold the promise of a drunken man.

Then Lan Qiren repeated the same thing, while sober, in the middle of daytime, right in front of everyone. He might not have worded it the same way, but the content was the same. He did not want Wen Ruohan to marry any woman. He refused to acknowledge his intent but he was also visibly pleased when Wen Ruohan promised to not attend the matchmaking.

How could Wen Ruohan ever let him go, like this? It might be the first time he was genuinely desiring someone for himself. The first time he couldn't care less about the consequences awaiting. He might lose his position as the clan heir. He might incur his father's wrath for refusing his order. He was risking a lot of things, but it all felt worth it.

He giggled to himself. Oh well, if RenRen was too shy, he would have to be the one to take the initiative. He couldn't just hope for Lan Qiren to lose his inhibition again just to hear the sincere words from his mouth. He just needed to make sure that their relationship will continue to move forward.

First step? Bathing together, of course! What better way was there to bond? Wen Ruohan grinned and continued taking off his clothes, leaving himself in only his underpants.

He barged into the bathroom unannounced and received a flying wooden bucket to his head.

They reached Kuizhou, in time to hear rumours of the demonic cultivator, who had unfortunately escaped to a different city, after attacking a temple. The good news was that Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing were presumably able to track the man and were currently chasing him, as the townspeople spoke of two cultivators in white who also appeared not long after the madman's arrival. They came in time to stop the man from slaughtering all the occupants of the temple, though unfortunately not in time to stop him from killing almost all the monks.

They headed to the temple that was attacked and grimaced at the sight of blood pooling on the ground, dripping from the stairs above. The attack was considerably still fresh, for the bodies were still there and the townspeople did not dare to enter the place yet. There were no cultivator clans here to cleanse the place from the residual resentful energy either. Lan Qiren performed a quick cleansing ritual before they both stepped onto the ground.

Wen Ruohan was still carrying the Yin Iron, it would be terrible if he came to a place where a mass murder had just occurred while still carrying an item that was forged to utilize resentful energy.

It was a bloodbath. Lan Qiren's eyes widened and he tugged on Wen Ruohan's sleeve, pointing to a monk who was slumped against the wall right beside the temple door. "I think he's still alive."

Wen Ruohan too noticed that the monk's chest was still rising. They rushed towards the old monk and Wen Ruohan was about to help channeling his spiritual energy to help the monk heal, but the monk shakily raised his hand and opened his mouth. Blood dripped down to his jaw but the monk weakly opened his eyes. "Children..."

"Children?" Wen Ruohan repeated.

"Please... the child...ren..." the monk croaked.

His hand dropped down. Lan Qiren held his breath. "... He's dead."

"... There must be children still alive here, possibly hidden when the guy came. Let's look for them," Wen Ruohan suggested.

Lan Qiren nodded. They pushed the door open and were appalled to see the wooden floor completely soaked in rusty crimson. Several more bodies were lying on the floor, mostly no longer breathing, though Lan Qiren could see that some were twitching. They should get a physician to come as soon as they find the children. Lan Qiren noticed another monk who seemed to be calling for them, as he struggled to raise his hand.

He knelt by the monk. "Yes?"

"Child...ren..." the monk mumbled with difficulty. His face had been slashed, he must have been in pain all the time. "Under..."

His hand pointed at the statue of the deity worshipped in the temple. Wen Ruohan slowly walked closer to the statue. He frowned. "... The board. There's something underneath the board."

Cloud Recess had the same mechanism and secret rooms or spaces, where they kept valuable things underneath the floorboards. Lan Qiren shouted, "Take it off!"

Wen Ruohan pried open the floor.

Sure enough, there were several children of varying ages - some as young as six or seven, others as old as twelve to fourteen. They were all huddled up together. Few were likely already dead, as their bodies were already stiff. The rest however were still alive, though they were already as pale as corpses could be. Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan quickly pulled the children out from the small, cramped, hiding space.

Wen Ruohan cradled a young teenage boy, who was finally catching up his breath. "Are you okay? What's your name?"

The boy gasped for air, before finally opening his eyes. His lips were still trembling. "...Zhao..." the boy struggled to speak.

Wen Ruohan patted his head. "It's okay, A Zhao. You've done very well, you survived."

A Zhao burst out crying. Lan Qiren slumped onto the floor himself. He looked at the rest of the children. Even if they survived, they would be traumatized for life. They were locked here, with the knowledge that some of them had died, and the adults caring for them out there were killed protecting them.

He looked at Wen Ruohan. "What are we going to do with these children?"

Wen Ruohan sighed. He contemplated for a moment, then decided, "I'll bring them back to Ruoyu and the others. The village is peaceful and has a good air, they can heal better."

"Are you going to take them into the Wen Sect?" Lan Qiren asked.

"If they want," Wen Ruohan answered.

They carried as many of the living children they could to the local apothecary. Kuizhou unfortunately had few physicians and fewer were unwilling to treat unknown children. Wen Ruohan tossed a bag of coins to the physician and the man immediately clamped his mouth and started working.

A Zhao was the first one to wake up. He looked terrified at first, but eventually relaxed when he recognized Wen Ruohan as the man who pulled him out from the dark space. He immediately bowed to thank the two. Lan Qiren could not help thinking that A Zhao looked familiar somehow.

"What is your full name, child?" Wen Ruohan asked.

"Zhao Liu," The boy answered.

"Liu, as in... six?" Wen Ruohan asked.

A Zhao nodded. "I'm the sixth oldest among the children... right after Wu Ge."

"... Slaves, huh," Wen Ruohan commented. He smiled warmly at the boy. "Well, no worries. The bad guy who attacked you is being chased by very strong people now. If you want, you and the rest of your siblings can come stay with my cousin. He's a healer and though he nags a lot, his house is big, there is plenty of food, and everyone is nice."

The boy's eyes brightened. "Really?"

"We can even give you a new name, if you'd like," Wen Ruohan suddenly offered.

"A name?" The boy gasped.

Wen Ruohan grinned. "Instead of just six..." He paused, then glanced at Lan Qiren, remembering their first and second encounters were near the river. Stream of water, hm. "How about... let's go with the flow. Your name will be Zhuliu, how about that?"

Lan Qiren rolled his eyes. This man, casually giving a courtesy name to a child he met for the first time...

Hm?

Hold on.

Zhuliu? Zhao... Zhuliu?

Wen... Zhuliu?

Lan Qiren gawked. Wen Ruohan took the boy's wrist and examined it. "Your cultivation is almost ruined but it's still salvageable. Your spiritual vein is of good quality too. Once you're healed, I can bring you to my sect and train you."

No. That meant helping Wen Zhuliu develop his core-melting technique, which would only cause harm in the future.

"Let's raise him together!" Lan Qiren blurted out, again without thinking.

There was a moment of silence.

A Zhao fluttered his eyelids. His cheeks turned red. "Oh, are you two married?"

Chapter End Notes

A Zhao: Are you two married?

WRH: In my heart we already are.

We're adopting him

“Are you two married?”

Lan Qiren had to repeatedly remind himself that this was an innocent young boy who knew nothing, whom they had just rescued, who still had yet to recover from his trauma. *No, do not hit him, do not yell at him. He doesn't know anything.*

Wen Ruohan grinned. “Do we look good as a couple, A Zhao?”

A Zhao nodded. “You look like the old married couple from the farmer's market.”

Lan Qiren began reciting the Gusu Lan sect rules in his head. Wen Ruohan grinned and patted his shoulders. “Hear that, RenRen? Children do not lie.”

Lan Qiren brushed his hand away. “We're not married.”

“Yet,” Wen Ruohan added. “RenRen proposed to me and he knows he has my heart already, though unfortunately due to circumstances we can't have our ceremony yet.”

“Circumstances?” A Zhao repeated.

“It's related to what's happening to you now. Can you tell us what you remember before you were... in that space? When you first came to the temple?” Lan Qiren asked. He then quickly added, “Of course, if it's painful, you don't have to.”

A Zhao pursed his lips. “Wu Ge brought us to the temple,” he began.

“Wu Ge?”

“There were eight of us, for as long as I can remember. Da Ge and Er Ge were sold to some rich people. San Jie got sold to the brothel. Si Ge died after he got beaten up by the slave traders. It was Wu Ge who got us out - me, Xiao Qi, and Xiao Ba,” A Zhao explained.

They were all either orphans with no homes or young children who were sold by their parents. The slave traders worked in small groups. A Zhao and his friends were forced to either steal or beg at the streets while they were young, then would be either sold as slaves or prostitutes once they were old enough. Wu Ge, the oldest of the group of enslaved children left, had managed to get them away from the clutches of the slave traders.

They traveled for a while by hitchhiking rides from kind merchants to different cities. On their way to Yueyang, the cart they were riding was attacked by robbers. However, they were rescued by a group of rogue cultivators - an older master and his two disciples. The children followed the group of rogue, who introduced them to Young Master Chang Ran. Chang Ran agreed to house the children as long as they would join his new clan. Wu Ge and the other children began learning from the rogue master and his disciples, even taking their surnames.

“Their surnames? Then...” Lan Qiren paused.

“His name was Master Zhao,” A Zhao said. “Wu Ge also took that name and became Zhao Wu. Xiao Qi is now Bai Qi, and Xiao Ba is Xue Ba.”

Zhao Wu and Zhao Liu, then Bai Qi and Xue Ba. That fit perfectly. The rogue Master Zhao's two disciples were named Xue Yanzi and Bai Yiqing. A Zhao confirmed their assumptions based on the courtesan's words, that the people surnamed Xue and Bai were in fact Xue Yanzi and Bai Yiqing.

“And where are Zhao Wu, Bai Qi, and Xue Ba?” Wen Ruohan asked.

A Zhao pointed at the other sleeping figure that Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan had brought out from the temple - a girl, seemingly eleven or twelve years old. “That’s Xue Ba. Bai Qi... I don’t know. I’m sure he was with me... back then.”

Bai Qi was likely one of the poor bodies they had to leave behind, for they were no longer breathing. “So this other child is not one of your friends?” Wen Ruohan asked, pointing at the other younger child whom they had also taken out. A Zhao shook his head.

“She joined us after we started living in that house. Master Zhao brought back orphans from the city one in a while. He’d test them for their potential, taught the ones who can cultivate. The ones who can’t would do the house chores,” A Zhao said. “Young Master Chang... he didn’t really teach us anything. He has a terrible temper, but once in a while he’d bring back candies or give us money.”

“Terrible temper?” Lan Qiren asked.

“He yelled a lot. Often louder when he was arguing with Master Zhao or Xue Shixiong,” A Zhao said.

“Do you know what they’re arguing about?” Wen Ruohan questioned.

“Young Master Chang doesn’t like what Master Zhao was teaching us. He said they’re dangerous and can ruin us. Master Zhao wouldn’t stop,” A Zhao said and bit his lower lip.

He told them more of the disagreements between Chang Ran and Master Zhao. Added with the details they had already collected from the innkeeper at Yueyang and the courtesan, Lan Qiren felt like he could get a better picture of what was happening. Master Zhao as it turned out was obsessed with what Chang Ran had worded as a 'harmful double-edged method', even teaching it to his own disciples. Their alliance did not break though because Chang Ran was low on support and he needed Master Zhao’s knowledge and expertise to teach young disciples. He taught some questionable things, but he and his disciples were also good at teaching them all the six arts.

Even though Xue Yanzi was adamant about following his master, Bai Yiqing on the other hand was not too keen on it. She loved the children and wanted to support Chang Ran’s ambition of starting his clan, if it meant giving a home to the children. She persuaded Chang Ran to stay so he could keep funding their little group, and was afraid that if Chang Ran was

displeased he would kick them out. Tension however continued to grow between Chang Ran and Xue Yanzi - either due to their disagreement in Master Zhao's method or Xue Yanzi's jealousy of Chang Ran's budding friendship with his martial sister.

Then Master Zhao suddenly decided to enter self-seclusion one day to break through. That was when things took a turn.

Master Zhao was found dead - a few days after entering seclusion. The timing vaguely matched with the courtesan's account of her former clients' last visit. Xue Yanzi and Chang Ran both accused each other of killing Master Zhao. A fight broke out. Zhao Wu decided to take the children away from Yueyang before they could see the result of the fight, citing that the city was no longer safe for them to stay. They found shelter in the temple and had been staying there since then. Zhao Wu however had left on his own once the Chang Clan members came to look for them, in order to divert their attention. He was never seen anymore after that.

A Zhao sobbed a little. "Maybe... if only Wu Ge is still around... we could have been saved. Wu Ge is the best fighter, the only one who learned everything passed down by Master Zhao."

Lan Qiren frowned. "Didn't you also learn from Master Zhao?"

"The younger ones mostly learned from Bai Shijie and Xue Shixiong. Master Zhao only taught me some of his techniques. I heard he taught Wu Ge a lot more," A Zhao said.

"Just what kind of things were they teaching you?" Lan Qiren was curious.

A Zhao tried to recount it. "Martial arts. Using spiritual energy. Forming golden cores. Manipulating golden cores."

"... Manipulating?" Lan Qiren repeated.

A Zhao nodded. "Master Zhao is trying to create a new technique. I don't know what it is but it has something to do with trying to manipulate golden cores and spiritual energy," he answered.

"Does he keep his notes anywhere?" Wen Ruohan asked.

"Wu Ge took it."

Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren exchanged understanding looks. Wherever this Zhao Wu was, they had to find him soon.

Xue Ba woke up not long after that. She did not warm up to Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan as quickly as A Zhao did. She looked rather distrustful and Lan Qiren did not blame her for that.

The girl was sold by her own parents and lived on the streets begging, while waiting to be sent to the brothel. However, when A Zhao told her that Wen Ruohan was offering them a place in his sect, she looked relieved, albeit still a little wary.

“What clan do you come from?” She asked.

“Qishan Wen. Have you heard of it?” Wen Ruohan asked.

Her face darkened. “Not much, but I do know it’s a big clan. I’m going to have to decline your offer.”

A Zhao looked shocked. “Why?”

“I don’t have the potential to be a cultivator, Master Zhao made it very clear to me. I’m going to stay in the city and look for a job. I’m old enough to do house chores now,” Xue Ba said.

"But Xiao Ba-"

“Liu Ge, look what getting involved with cultivators got us. Wu Ge is gone, our other friends too... you can go and follow these two young masters, but I’m staying here.”

A Zhao failed to persuade Xue Ba to come with her. Wen Ruohan handed her a few coins so she could survive until she could get a job. The other surviving child too refused to come and opted to stay with Xue Ba for the same reason. With only A Zhao in their care for now, they set off to leave Kuizhou, heading towards Dafan Mountain back to see Wen Ruoyu. Lan Qiren thought about going back to the first old temple in Yueyang to perform Inquiry once again but Wen Ruohan was vehemently against it in fear of jeopardizing his health and safety.

They were beginning to shed some light on the case but it was still far from over. Xue Yanzi was still on the loose, possessing one body after another. Master Zhao's death was still a mystery. The Yin Iron was still somewhere out there, either with Zhao Wu who was now missing, or in the hands of Chang Clan. Lan Qiren wasn’t sure how they were supposed to move from now on, aside from capturing the mad man.

“You look stressed, RenRen. Don’t think too much of it,” Wen Ruohan said.

They had already walked for half a day and they had not even left the city yet. Riding spiritual swords in the middle of a busy city was not ideal. They had yet to find a cart they could hitchhike a ride from and the young boy was too fatigued to walk at the same pace as the two highly talented young adult cultivators. Wen Ruohan had suggested that they should only walk for as far as the next small town and find a place to stay for the night, since poor A Zhao was badly in need for a proper rest.

Lan Qiren understood that this was hardly his problem. Probably. Actually, screw it, this was his problem. This boy, under the care of Wen Ruohan, would grow up to be the Core-Melting Hand. The weird forbidden things that he had learned from Master Zhao were likely the basis of how he developed the deadly technique. Lan Qiren understood now why Wen Zhuliu was so loyal to Wen Ruohan. The man not only saved him and his friends from their deaths, he

also gave him a new name and a new life. To Wen Zhuliu, nothing Wen Ruohan did could make him forget his benevolence.

It did make him wonder how Wen Ruohan had done everything on his own in his original timeline. He stole a glance at the older man. In his original timeline, he wasn't even here with Wen Ruohan, yet the man somehow still got entangled with the case of the demonic cultivator and still rescued Wen Zhuliu. Lan Qiren was already aware of his strength, but not of his capability.

"Am I that handsome, RenRen?" Wen Ruohan teased when he noticed Lan Qiren was staring.

"Ridiculous," Lan Qiren grunted. "Just wondering... how are we going to move forward from here."

Wen Ruohan clicked his tongue. "Tsk tsk... told you all that overthinking is making you grow unwanted hairs, RenRen!"

"It's a beard and it is nothing weird," Lan Qiren clenched his teeth.

"You look like my uncle with a beard on, I don't like it," Wen Ruohan pouted.

"If that would make you respect me a little more, then I'd grow my beard for as long as I can," Lan Qiren uttered.

A Zhao looked at Lan Qiren. "What do I call you? I feel like you're too young to be my uncle..."

"Address me as unc- ahem, a big brother if you must," Lan Qiren stated. There was no need to be formal with a boy who had yet to receive any education.

"Our Lan Er Gege is so stiff," Wen Ruohan grinned and Lan Qiren felt like smacking someone when he heard the word 'Lan Er Gege'. There was only one person shamelessly yelling 'Lan Er Gege' everyday in his time and even if Wen Ruohan was not wrong, he did not want to be addressed that way.

"You can call me Ren Ge if you like," Lan Qiren said.

"Ren Ge," A Zhao repeated, thankfully in a polite manner.

Unlike the uncouth older man who was pouting at him in a childlike manner. "You let him call you Ren Ge immediately. How long did it take you to even tell me your name? I'm hurt, RenRen."

Lan Qiren ignored him. "You can call him Han Ge if he allows you," he said.

Wen Ruohan's eyes lightened up. "You can also call me that, RenRen. Han Ge doesn't sound too bad."

"Did you say something, Young Master Wen?"

Wen Ruohan shrugged and raised his two hands as a sign of defeat. He would rather have the second young master of Gusu Lan call him by his name rather than going back to addressing him formally. He vowed to make the younger man to call him with an affectionate nickname later in the future.

Going from Kuizhou back to Dafan Mountain on foot was a long journey and they had several more small towns and villages to pass through to get there. When the sky began to turn dark, Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan started searching for an inn to stay for the night. They found a fairly nice establishment in a small town and decided to stay there for the night.

As soon as Lan Qiren entered the front door, he was greeted by the body of a man flung across the room, crashing into tables. The customers sitting at the table all yelled and cursed as their food had all toppled down and splattered onto the floor.

Lan Qiren, "...." What a way to be welcomed.

He searched for the source of the disturbance and was horrified when he saw a familiar face - the face of a certain someone who had brought him nightmares in his past life - clapping her hands and laughing at the unfortunate man who just got sent flying. A wave of headache and dizziness worse than playing Inquiry against a vengeful spirit hit him, for that was how terrifying the trauma caused by this person.

The person who once shaved his glorious beard!

He failed to notice a jar of alcohol flying in a straight line towards him but Wen Ruohan quickly pulled him to his side and shielded him from the object. The Qishan Wen heir deftly caught the jar with his hands and scowled.

"Ah, we meet again, young masters," Wen Ruohan commented, his arms still wrapped around Lan Qiren and pressing the latter against his broad chest.

Lan Qiren pushed the older man away. The room had gotten a tad quieter now as the travelers met the four guest disciples of Gusu Lan - Jiang Fengmian, Nie Yizhou, Wei Changze, and Cangse Sanren. As far as Lan Qiren could remember, it wasn't unusual for these four to go out night hunting, but he certainly didn't expect to see them here. He glared at them. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be studying?!"

"Not even a greeting, Second Young Master Lan?" Nie Yizhou raised an eyebrow. "We have a few days off, there's no class because the elders are all busy. We're out here on a night hunt."

Cangse Sanren walked over, one hand still holding a jar. "What, so this is the Second Young Master Lan you have been talking about? Quite handsome, but he sure looks boring."

Lan Qiren spluttered. "You... little menace! Drinking alcohol and now causing ruckus in a public place, do you not have any shame?"

Cangse Sanren grinned. "Nope! Besides, that guy earlier was the one who started it. He spilled hot soup on A Ze and he harassed us when we demanded an apology. Ah, we're not in

Cloud Recess, you can't stop me from drinking!"

Wen Ruohan nodded. "Point taken, except that you're wrong about one thing. My RenRen isn't a boring man. He is in fact quite funny and very cute."

Lan Qiren's face flushed with embarrassment.

He then noticed Wei Changze's expression.

He spluttered. "What are you looking at?!" *This is all your fault!* Why else would he be in this position if not because Wei Changze told him to follow Wen Ruohan and most importantly, planted that stupid idea to seduce him?!

Wei Changze put on a deceptively innocent smile, that Lan Qiren knew was definitely hiding his real intention. "Second Young Master Lan gets along very well with Young Master Wen each time I see you. What are you doing here, anyway? Also, who is the child hiding behind you?"

Right. A Zhao. Lan Qiren had almost forgotten about him since he had been silent when they arrived - perhaps too exhausted to talk. "It's a long story, but we need to get a room. The child is not in a good condition and he needs rest."

A Zhao shyly peeked from behind Wen Ruohan's back. The four young cultivators landed their gaze on him.

"There are only two rooms left in the whole inn, though, and we already reserved it," Cangse Sanren said. "We don't mind sharing for a night, of course." The child looked pale and definitely in need of a proper rest.

Sharing a room with these people? Lan Qiren grimaced. "We'll find another inn then."

"This is the only inn around here. By the time you reach the next city it's going to be too dark and businesses will be closed. Let the boy lie down for a rest first and we can discuss the arrangement later," Jiang Fengmian suggested.

Lan Qiren conceded. They went to one of the rooms reserved by the group and let A Zhao lay down. As soon as he was tucked in, the boy instantly dozed off. His body was exhausted and his own mind was also still fatigued. He had just been rescued from a traumatic event after all.

"So what's going on?" Nie Yizhou asked as soon as they were all seated.

Wei Changze had started on the tea, serving everyone. Lan Qiren noticed that Cangse Sanren looked unhappy somehow but decided to not speak on it for the moment. She was likely not pleased that Wei Changze was still treating himself like a servant, as if he was beneath all of them, who happened to be born as young masters of prominent clans. Unfortunately his son would hold the same sentiment in the future, thinking of himself as beneath the others in status. As much as Lan Qiren disliked the boy's unruliness, he had never thought of Wei Wuxian as being beneath him due to his birth status.

Oh well, perhaps if Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren could live to raise their son this time, things would be better.

“The Lan Elders have all been busy and even the Elder Lan Fan has been seen leaving Cloud Recess. Tell us the truth, there is something big going on here, isn’t there?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

Lan Qiren’s eyes widened. “Uncle Fan went out?”

His uncle Lan Fan was not only his and Qingheng Jun’s teacher. He was also their uncle, who had helped raise them after the death of their parents.

He was the elder killed by Bai Yiqing, for what she claimed was a personal vendetta.

Lan Qiren clenched his fists as his mind began putting things together. Xue Yanzi had taken over Chang Ran’s body - ultimately killing him by driving his soul out. He then went on to continue possessing different people while on a murder spree. Even right now, he was still on the run while Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing were chasing him.

Did he possibly possess his uncle? But this was his Uncle Lan Fan, who had studied the method of suppressing and countering demonic arts for years. How could Lan Fan be easily possessed? If he was, why didn’t Qingheng Jun just report that it was a body possession, that Lan Fan wouldn’t be able to survive anyway? That way, Bai Yiqing would at least not have to be condemned for murder since it was an act of self defense or purging the evil, she wouldn’t have to be separated from Xichen and Wangji -

Lan Qiren froze when he felt Wen Ruohan’s warm hand on his.

Oh.

They didn’t know, he realized.

It had only been Wen Ruohan investigating the case in his original timeline, possibly to track the Yin Iron. Lan Qiren was never here with him back then. All he knew was that Qingheng Jun had brought back a woman he had never seen before along with the body of his dead teacher. Bai Yiqing confessed to killing the man and willingly accepted the punishment without a word, despite Qingheng Jun’s protest. In the end Qingheng Jun decided to marry her so her life would be spared, and she was kept locked in that gentian house.

There were many possibilities of what could have happened. If there had been no investigation (and as far as he remembered, there was none since Bai Yiqing simply admitted to it), Qingheng Jun and the elders might have never find the proof that their teacher had been possessed before his death - after all, the one man whose expertise was in countering demonic arts was the one who had died. They only had the words of Bai Yiqing and nobody would trust the person who had murdered their precious clan member. Due to Chang Clan covering up the news and tracks to preserve their little reputation, there was little they could have done to obtain proof. She gave herself up, there was no investigation, the case was closed just like that.

Chang Ran and Xue Yanzi were fighting. Xue Yanzi accused Chang Ran of killing Master Zhao. He took over Chang Ran's body and committed all the crimes. Bai Yiqing might think the person possessing others was still Chang Ran, since she had no way of knowing the real soul inside. That would explain the personal vendetta she had - it was not against Lan Fan as Lan Qiren thought in the past, but the murderer of her teacher and 'martial brother'.

"RenRen, are you okay?" Wen Ruohan asked, his tone concerned.

Lan Qiren shook his head. "We have to search for the demonic cultivator as soon as we can."

"Demonic cultivator?!" Nie Yizhou almost yelled. "What the heck - why is something so serious being kept a secret?"

"There's no proof yet and there are some parties trying to keep it down," Wen Ruohan explained. "All we have are the words of few witnesses."

"Interesting. So what's the plan?" Cangse Sanren smirked.

"Our priority now is to give this boy, who is a surviving witness, a home; find the remaining witness; then assist my brother, who's chasing the demonic cultivator," Lan Qiren said.

"Qinghe Nie would have no problem lending our people to help Qingheng Jun," said Nie Yizhou.

"If you give us the description Yunmeng Jiang can help looking for the remaining witness as well," Jiang Fengmian said.

Wen Ruohan chuckled. "Great. Then all our problems will be solved."

"What about the boy?" Wei Changze asked.

Wen Ruohan casually slung his arm around Lan Qiren's shoulders. "Once RenRen and I get married, we're adopting him."

Lan Qiren choked on his hot tea.

Night talk

Chapter Notes

I'm late with the update again... TvT

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

To drink, or not to drink? That was the question. Technically he would not be breaking any rules, since alcohol was only prohibited in Cloud Recess but not outside. However Lan Qiren knew better that for generations his family had all been genetically weak against alcohol. Lan Xichen's voice would go up and loud whenever he was drunk, while Lan Wangji would be breaking all the sect rules with just a sip of alcohol. Whatever he did tonight would be a taint in his reputation in the future and worst of all, he wouldn't remember it.

However, wasn't that the point? To drink so you could forget your sorrows?

Or to pretend that your supposed future enemy did not just proclaim in front of all your acquaintances that the two of you were engaged (and you had somehow proposed), even planning to adopt a child you picked up from a temple while chasing a demonic cultivator on a murder spree. That sounded like a good excuse to drink. Maybe Lan Qiren could forget the way Jiang Fengmian and Nie Yizhou looked at him earlier, and most importantly wipe away the image of the shit-eating grin on Cangse Sanren as well as the amused look from Wei Changze.

They were supposed to be discussing something important - the demonic cultivator. Then A Zhao was about to stir up and Wen Ruohan decided to save the conversation for the next day so that they would not disturb the sleeping A Zhao. Cangse Sanren, that menace, caught on that Lan Qiren was trying to avoid the topic of 'marriage with Wen Ruohan' and cheekily pointed it out, but fortunately Jiang Fengmian spared him from any teasing when they realized he had turned into a ripe tomato from the embarrassment. Cangse Sanren shared the room for tonight with A Zhao, taking the spare bed, while the rest of the males shared the remaining one room.

Lan Qiren decided he would rather sacrifice one night of sleep rather than staying in a room with Wen Ruohan and the three others, where he knew he would be 'interrogated' and Wen Ruohan would only be 'feeding' them. Especially Wei Changze, this closet gremlin! Even though he had been mostly silent the whole time, Lan Qiren could see from his eyes and expression that he was actually laughing the whole time!

Lan Qiren was just about to pick up the alcohol jar when another hand stopped him. Wei Changze smiled as he joined him at the rooftop. "Drinking and getting intoxicated while sitting at such a high place is not a good idea, Second Young Master Lan."

Lan Qiren glared at him. "Whose fault do you think this is?"

"I did not think that Second Young Master Lan would make a move so fast. At most I thought you'd only be friends by now," Wei Changze said, as if he wasn't the one who planted the idea in Lan Qiren's head. "You truly go beyond my expectations."

Lan Qiren resisted his urge to strangle the man. "You-"

"How did you propose?"

"I did not."

"Did Young Master Wen lie?"

"..."

Wei Changze chuckled. "Alright, so you 'did not propose'. Things happen, I suppose."

"... A lot of things did happen," Lan Qiren muttered.

"So, aside from your positively progressing relationship, what about the demonic cultivator? Does it have anything to do with the Yin Iron?"

Lan Qiren exhaled and told Wei Changze details about their investigation. He told him about their findings - from the issue with Chang Clan and Bai Yiqing's group, to how they found A Zhao. If Wei Wuxian's brilliance and analytical thinking were passed down from Wei Changze, perhaps he could catch on to more clues than Lan Qiren did.

Wei Changze frowned. "... I do not think Xue Yanzi holds the Yin Iron with him. At least not now," he said.

"Why?" Lan Qiren asked.

"If a demonic cultivator is not heard about anymore in the future, then Maiden Bai and Qingheng Jun must have defeated him in the end. Wouldn't they have obtained the piece? Among the five clans, Gusu Lan and Qishan Wen are the only ones possessing a piece initially and according to you, neither pieces were obtained from a demonic cultivator," Wei Changze reasoned.

"That would mean he has hidden it somewhere," Lan Qiren said.

"It might be with the remaining member, Zhao Wu. Since Zhao Wu took the notes, it is possible he had taken the Yin Iron as well," Wei Changze said.

"If so we have to find Zhao Wu as fast as we can," Lan Qiren said.

Wei Changze nodded. He then hesitantly added, "Do you think... maybe Zhao Wu or his master's notes survived and... either Young Master Wen or someone from the Wen Clan took it?"

Lan Qiren frowned. "You think the Wen Clan has anything to do with this?"

"I'm just saying it is a possibility. Based on our interactions so far, Young Master Wen certainly doesn't seem like the tyrannical, power-lust man that you describe he would be in the future."

Lan Qiren thought about it. Everything he knew about the current Wen Ruohan indeed contrasted the future Wen Ruohan in his original timeline. However, it was also said that Wen Ruohan often experienced strange mood swings as well. He could be laughing in one minute and hostile in the next. "I thought we've established that the mood swings can be caused by the Yin Iron?"

"I know. But it feels unsettling to me. That there is a madman running around, who is currently possessing someone else's body." Moreover, Lan Qiren had told him that the future Wen Ruohan used the Yin Iron to control resentful energy and make living puppets. Wen Mao was originally a righteous cultivator who detested demonic cultivation and even led the battle against Xue Chonghai, how could the future Wen Ruohan obtain the knowledge of a forbidden art? It could not have been passed down from his predecessors, there was definitely some outside source.

"You think Xue Yanzi has possessed Wen Ruohan in my original time? That doesn't feel right. So far he was only capable of possessing others for short terms. The bodies he took over would be in a state of constant qi deviation and rot off quick. Wen Ruohan lived long enough for his two children to grow into adults and get married," Lan Qiren explained.

Wei Changze pondered. Lan Qiren was the one investigating the case. He would certainly know more. However, Wei Changze felt like even if the chances were low, they still could not dismiss the possibility. "But what if he was? There's no way we can tell if a possession were to happen, right?"

Lan Qiren recalled something. "There is a way. Zidian."

"Zidian?"

"Madam Yu - Yu Ziyuan's weapon. It can separate the soul from the physical body that has been possessed by a spirit," Lan Qiren explained. "You'd need to whip the possessed person though and I can't think of a way we can persuade Yu Ziyuan to whip the future leader of Qishan Wen if there is an actual possession."

"Yu Ziyuan is..."

"The current top disciple of Meishan Yu and Jiang Fengmian's future wife," Lan Qiren answered.

Wei Changze clenched his fists. "Right, that, I need to ask you about this too. Why didn't you tell me that Fengmian also likes Maiden Liang? Did I steal her from him?"

Lan Qiren was surprised. "What? No, you didn't steal her!"

“But Fengmian likes her,” Wei Changze argued.

Lan Qiren had heard of the rumours but he did not pay close attention to it. It was true that Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan’s marriage wasn’t the most harmonious and that Jiang Fengmian was partial to Wei Wuxian. He did not know to what extent the rumour was true but he sure as hell knew Cangse Sanren had genuinely loved Wei Changze. “She chose you anyway, does it matter?”

“Of course it matters, Fengmian is my friend.”

“And you’re also his friend. She wouldn’t choose Jiang Fengmian even if you reject her advances. Cangse Sanren is a free person, she does what she wants. Jiang Fengmian is not someone petty, he would give his blessings to the two of you,” said Lan Qiren.

“It does not feel right...”

“For once, just think about yourself, Young Master Wei,” Lan Qiren huffed.

Wei Changze fell silent. He sighed and relaxed his body a little. “I should not worry myself over this. There is a murderer running rampant and a future where everything is a disaster. Ah, that reminds me - aside from Young Master Wen now bent for you, what else did you change?”

Lan Qiren spluttered. “You-”

“And the investigation, of course.”

Lan Qiren huffed. “I didn’t know about this case before, but I still don’t know what will change from me knowing this and... well, I did... stop him from going to a matchmaking session.”

Wei Changze’s eyes widened. “What?”

“My brother has met Bai Yiqing. In a couple more years my first nephew, Xichen would be conceived, since she got pregnant not long after they were married,” Lan Qiren said. “Wen Xu is older than Xichen, so by right Wen Ruohan should meet his wife around this time, but so far it’s not happening. Ah, that means Young Master Nie and Young Master Jiang would also be married not long after this...”

“Young Master Nie did say his father has already sought a bride for him. But... Fengmian too?” Wei Changze asked.

“He has a daughter, remember?” Lan Qiren reminded Wei Changze of the things he told him before. Jiang Yanli was a pivotal existence after all, since Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng’s relationship had strained horribly after Jiang Yanli’s death.

“Ah,” Wei Changze just remembered.

“Don’t worry too much about it. I don’t understand why you’d have to give up even if Young Master Jiang likes her. It’s insulting to her, and to him as well,” said Lan Qiren.

Jiang Fengmian would be heartbroken but he would have to learn to move on. Preferably completely, so that his wife would not be hurt and the children would not be the victims of their parents' conflict.

Wei Changze exhaled. "... I see. So what did you say to Young Master Wen to stop him?"

"I told him that he can't..." Lan Qiren paused. He gasped and fumed at Wei Changze. How dare he tried to trick him into answering by changing the topic so suddenly! "You shut up!"

"You took my advice very well. The next step would be to announce it at the next discussion conference," Wei Changze said. "Tie him up so that even if he wants to escape, he can't."

Lan Qiren decided to pretend that he heard nothing. For all he knew if Wei Changze were to plant more foolish suggestions into his head, he would never be able to recover from the embarrassment the next time the gremlin's words got him again.

When the morning birds chirped and the roosters cuckooed, Lan Qiren was already out to wash up and do his morning meditation. He was still slightly tired since he had forgone a night's sleep after traveling a fair distance but his cultivation kept him from passing out. He had been meditating for the rest of the night on the floor and his back was hurting.

A hand reached out to him with a jar of healing balm. Lan Qiren immediately recognized the smell of herbs commonly used for pain relief. "Oh, thank you..."

He paused when his eyes met Wen Ruohan's smiling face. "You should have just laid in the cot with me, RenRen. Your body is in pain now, isn't it?"

As if he would embarrass himself in front of the other young masters and most importantly the future Wei couple! If he ever did that, Lan Qiren knew Cangse Sanren would keep that story to bring it up in the future, likely even passing it down to her child. "Shameless!"

"We are two men, what is there to be ashamed of?"

"Two men can also..." Lan Qiren paused.

Wen Ruohan's eyes lit up and his grin grew wider. "Hmm? Tell me, what can two men do? RenRen, you sound like you know things that can be done with two men. Do you keep some good materials at Gusu Lan-"

Lan Qiren's face turned red and he was ready to yell but Wen Ruohan laughed and quickly placed the healing balm into his hand. "Alright, don't be mad anymore. Ruoyu made that healing balm, I can guarantee that it works very well."

Remembering how much Wei Wuxian marveled Wen Qing's medical expertise, Lan Qiren accepted the balm. It was likely that she had learned most of her skills from her father and

predecessors. It was a shame that the Wen Clan healing branch was also dragged into the mess of the war and its aftermath, they were among the best in healing cultivation. Lan Qiren cleared his throat and thanked Wen Ruohan. He returned to their room and went behind the partition to apply the balm. He was about to take off his belt, when he realized Wen Ruohan was still looking at him expectantly.

“What are you doing? Get out!” He huffed.

“The pain is on your back, right? Let me help apply the salve.”

“I can do it myself.”

“Silly RenRen, what’s wrong with two men helping out each other? Or would you rather the other young masters do it? We’ve been travelling this long and you still won’t trust me?” Wen Ruohan pretended to sulk. “RenRen, I even ran from my arranged marriage for you, yet you still doubt me?”

“You two are being so noisy this early in the morning,” Nie Yizhou’s half asleep voice grunted in the morning.

“Young Master Wen,” Wei Changze’s voice came out from the other side of the partition. “You may be two men but it’s not appropriate for betrothed people to be too intimate before marriage.”

Wen Ruohan blinked. “Oh, I see. RenRen, you’re very upright, hmm?”

Lan Qiren gawked. Wei Changze, this... he was fanning it even more! “You’re speaking nonsense!”

“Understood. Well then, you shouldn’t refuse Young Master Wen’s kindness, Second Young Master Lan,” Wei Changze replied from behind the partition screen.

Lan Qiren was fuming inside. Wei Changze was truly so brazen behind his calm façade, he even set him up so shamelessly like this!

“That’s what he said. Let me help you, RenRen,” Wen Ruohan chuckled.

“Fengmian and I will be downstairs to request a bath for A Zhao, Young Master Wen and Second Young Master Lan can take your time,” Wei Changze uttered very nonchalantly.

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth. Fine, it was just applying some healing balm anyway, why should he be bothered? He handed the jar back to Wen Ruohan, then turned around so he did not have to look at the other and shrugged off his robes. “Make it quick.”

“...”

“What?”

“A... ah, nothing,” Wen Ruohan said.

Lan Qiren could feel Wen Ruohan's fingers were trembling a little as he gently moved his long ink-like hair away, revealing the smooth white back. Lan Qiren himself could slowly feel himself heating up when the other's fingers moved and pressed against his back, rubbing the salve against his bare skin.

"You're warm, RenRen. Are you having a fever?"

"Don't be ridiculous." How could a cultivator at his current level have a fever, unless he was seriously injured. Right now he was just a little fatigued.

"Your shoulders are so tense and stiff, RenRen. Shall I massage them for you?"

"No need." Allowing someone to touch him like this was already something he would never do, why would he even let him massage...

Why the hell was he even allowing Wen Ruohan to do this? He must have lost his mind. The lack of sleep was definitely messing up with his brain. "Enough," he said and quickly put on his robes again.

"You're so cranky, RenRen. That's why you should've just joined me last night," Wen Ruohan commented.

"I've had enough of waking up to your face."

"Do you know how many people covet to have this handsome face waking up next to them every morning? Shall I go back to Qishan and meet the woman?"

"No!" Lan Qiren instantly blurted out and turned around to grab Wen Ruohan's wrist.

To his dismay it was exactly the reaction Wen Ruohan was trying to get out of him. The Qishan Wen heir grinned. Lan Qiren hissed and released the hand. "We have more important things to do than... anything else."

Wen Ruohan nodded. "Of course, RenRen. Don't worry. We've got a lead, by the way."

Lan Qiren's eyes widened. "We do?"

"Mm. Let's talk about this after breakfast."

The medicine generously given by Wen Ruoyu worked very well, the wounds closed up in half the time it would have normally taken. Qingheng Jun failed to recall when was the last time he was this terribly injured. The demonic cultivator wasn't absurdly strong but it was not human. Normal people would have recoiled from the pain or have their strength reduced by a significant amount when injured, but not the madman. Even when Qingheng Jun pierced

through his torso with his sword, the madman would keep fighting as if he was at his full strength.

It was truly as if he had lost his mind.

They had been tracking the madman for the entire day now and finally decided to take a break. It was never a good choice to go against someone who could not perceive pain, while they were fatigued and depleted of energy. The inn they had stopped by only had one room left but Bai Yiqing did not mind sharing.

“But it is improper,” Qingheng Jun said.

“If you’re uncomfortable I can sleep outside. You’re the one paying, you don’t need to accommodate me,” she said.

Qingheng Jun shook his head. “With someone so dangerous wandering outside, it’s unwise for any of us to sleep alone in the dark, outdoors. We can ask for a spare bed.”

Bai Yiqing hummed a little. “Young Master is so courteous. I won’t do anything to sully you.”

Qingheng Jun sighed. “Aren’t you worried that I might do anything to you?”

“You can marry me to take responsibility,” she said as a joke. “Young Master seems to have a lot of money, with a big house I can raise as many children as I want.”

She didn’t mean it, of course. Qingheng Jun knew that. Yet, something in his heart stirred.

The innkeeper brought over a spare mattress and beddings to the room. Bai Yiqing took the spare mattress before Qingheng Jun could even argue. He moved the partition to divide their space so they could both have their privacy while sleeping.

“I feel like at the rate that we’re chasing him, we’re just going back to end up back near Dafan Mountain again,” Qingheng Jun commented as they both lied down to get ready for bed. “We might be going in circles. Where do you think his final destination is?”

“... He is nothing but a madman. A madman doesn’t think,” Bai Yiqing replied.

“Even resentful spirits have certain people they target for vengeance. Or a goal to achieve - whether it is to cultivate to become a powerful ghost king, or a demon...” Qingheng Jun’s voice trailed off. When it was clear that Bai Yiqing’s non-response was her refusal to talk about the madman anymore, he changed the topic, “Do you like children?”

There was a momentary silence before she finally replied, “I do.”

“Do you have younger siblings?” Qingheng Jun asked.

“We weren’t blood-related, but he was like my own younger brother. Shifu and I found him on the streets. Back then... we promised each other that people like us who lost our

families... we would give them a home as well. After that, Shifu would bring back young children and we would raise them together.”

It was unusual for Bai Yiqing to talk about herself. Qingheng Jun had spoken a little about his brother and his sect but she would rarely bring up about her own past.

“... What happened to your family? The children?” Qingheng Jun asked. Since Bai Yiqing had been traveling alone for months that meant the children she and her master picked up were no longer under her care.

She sighed. “Shifu died and the children were just... gone. That madman ruined everything.”

“Maiden Bai-”

“Wherever that person is going and whatever his aim is, my goal is not changing. I will eliminate him no matter what.”

Their conversation stopped there.

Yet, Qingheng Jun was unable to sleep. He had a feeling that the madman wasn’t just walking aimlessly. Bai Yiqing claimed the madman was possessed by a resentful spirit and that the body they had been fighting against was just a stolen vessel.

Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing had fought against the spirit numerous times yet the spirit inside had not tried to possess them even once. If that was true, he wondered if perhaps there was a specific criteria needed for the vessel, and if the madman was still out searching for a more suitable body to steal. The body however was already rotting and all bloodied, that it was barely recognizable.

Morning came and Qingheng Jun finally received a letter sent by a messenger bird. Elder Lan Fan had set out several days before and requested Qingheng Jun to come meet him before they continued their search for the madman.

He was likely not going to like the fact that Qingheng Jun had stayed in the same room with Bai Yiqing last night. Not that Qingheng Jun would tell him. The old man would suffer a heart attack just from seeing his nephew holding hands with a woman.

Talking about that...

He wondered how long Lan Qiren was going to follow Wen Ruohan. According to Uncle Lan Fan, Lan Qiren had yet to return to Gusu. Qingheng Jun had a slight suspicion that if he let his brother stay with the Qishan Wen heir any longer... he might have to send him away in red robes next time. If that were to happen, All the elders surely would be vomiting blood.

WRH: One day I'm going to use this healing balm for a different purpose in a different place 😈

Village of butterfly goddess

Lan Qiren had almost forgotten about Cangse Sanren, the menace, the bane of his life.

Compared to his previous life, what Cangse Sanren did seem so pale now in comparison with his current situation. Wen Ruohan had completely invaded his personal space that he so carefully guarded for years, then Wei Changze started planting cursed thoughts that had taken up a huge amount of space in his head against his will, causing him to embarrass himself.

He was reminded of the reason she was in his blacklist when the first thing she did as soon as she saw him at the breakfast table in the morning was to greet him with, “Good morning, Second Young Master Lan! I heard you and Young Master Wen had a lover spat early in the morning?”

She said it, right in front of everyone, with a voice so loud that all the other customers who were there for a meal nearly spat out their congee. Lan Qiren swore that Cangse Sanren was sent to him by the deities above for the sole purpose of making his blood pressure shot up to the sky.

“I’d say just eat the cabbage if you want, you’re not in Cloud Recess now, why hesitate? Or if you’re shy you can start with the tofu-”

“Cease your shamelessness, Maiden Liang!” Lan Qiren erupted with anger.

Wen Ruohan laughed. “You can’t make fun of him, maiden. Only I am allowed to.”

Cangse Sanren grinned. “So possessive, Young Master Wen.”

“Oh, you have no idea. My RenRen stops me every time I bring up matchmaking and says I’m not allowed to look at any woman,” Wen Ruohan proudly said.

Lan Qiren gawked. “You’re speaking lies!”

“Where did I lie? Did you or did you not stop me from going to see the woman?”

Lan Qiren gritted. “I never said you’re not allowed to look at any woman.”

“Am I allowed to just flirt then?”

“... No.”

Nie Yizhou, who just came downstairs to join them at the table clicked his tongue and shook his head. “A lover spat even here?”

Lan Qiren glared at him. So he was the one relaying it to Cangse Sanren! Nie Huaisang must have inherited his penchant for gossip from his father. Wei Changze and Jiang Fengmian who had just come back with a clean and freshly-dressed A Zhao joined them. A Zhao’s eyes lit up and he immediately went to sit next to Wen Ruohan, and looked hopefully at Lan Qiren.

Lan Qiren's eyes twitched a little but he moved to sit next to the boy, sandwiching A Zhao between himself and Wen Ruohan.

"Look at them, Young Master Nie. Even while having an argument they're still scattering dog food to us," Cangse Sanren snickered.

"So where are we going? What is the lead that you've got?" Lan Qiren asked, attempting to shift the topic.

Jiang Fengmian ordered some food for them. "Let's get our tummies filled first before we start talking about the serious things, shall we? Can't fight with an empty stomach."

Nobody objected to Jiang Fengmian's suggestion. After all they needed to reserve plenty of energy to travel and to fight against a dangerous demonic cultivator. Moreover even if they weren't hungry, A Zhao still needed to eat and the boy refused to eat alone. Even when the food arrived, he only kept eating plain rice congee until Wen Ruohan piled up his bowl with some meat and vegetables.

A Zhao was not used to eating much and could barely finish a bowl. He shyly thanked the young cultivators. "Thank you, gege and jiejie."

"No problem, A Zhao. You're a growing boy, of course you need to eat more," Wen Ruohan said, patting his head.

A Zhao fidgeted. "Am I really not troubling Han Ge and everyone? Is there something I can do to help?"

Lan Qiren looked at him, surprised. "You want to help, A Zhao?"

The boy nodded. "Ren Ge said you can't marry Han Ge until you find Wu Ge, right? I'll help you."

Lan Qiren nearly spat out his tea.

"My my!" Cangse Sanren exclaimed, a wide grin on her face. "What a wonderful boy you are, A Zhao. So kind and so smart, your fathers are so lucky."

"So fast, Second Young Master Lan. Are you going to be married before your brother?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

"No, more importantly, are you going to marry into the Wen Clan or is Young Master Wen marrying into the Lan Clan?" Nie Yizhou asked.

It wasn't just Wei Changze or Cangse Sanren now. All of these traitors had banded together to tease him to death!

Lan Qiren glared at them and seethed. "We are here to discuss the plan to find a dangerous serial murderer. Do not stray!"

Wen Ruohan nodded. "That's right. The faster we can solve this, the sooner RenRen and I can plan our wedding."

Lan Qiren spluttered. "You-"

"So, A Zhao, are you willing to help us look for Zhao Wu?" Wen Ruohan asked. "Only you know his face and the places he might possibly go. Is there somewhere you think he might go and ask help from?"

A Zhao shook his head. "We don't have anyone else. If there's someone else we know..." A Zhao paused. "Wu Ge might have made some friends outside but I don't know any of them. I see him talking to a lot of people..."

"You don't remember any of them?"

A Zhao scrunched his face, trying to recall hard. Lan Qiren couldn't blame him if he failed to remember. People don't normally remember each and every face they saw.

"You don't have to force yourself to remember, A Zhao. Didn't you say you have a lead?" Lan Qiren said, looking at Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan nodded. "When I left the room earlier this morning to look for RenRen, I heard the innkeeper talking to his wife, complaining about the merchant overcharging them for the new bedsheets he ordered yesterday."

"So?"

"The merchant claimed he deserved additional payment because he risked his life coming here to deliver the goods. He said there was a ruckus about a madman, who had murdered some other merchant in his village on the same day he was setting out," Wen Ruohan explained.

Jiang Fengmian nodded. "It could be the same man then. That must be where Qingheng Jun is."

"We should split. Fengmian and I can go back to our sects and gather some other senior disciples to help search for the one called Zhao Wu," Nie Yizhou suggested.

"Should A Zhao follow us then?" Jiang Fengmian suggested.

A Zhao's eyes widened and he suddenly grabbed onto Lan Qiren's arm, who was sitting next to him. "No, I don't want to stay away from Han Ge or Ren Ge!"

Sometimes Lan Qiren wondered if maybe he was just bad at reading people. Xichen wasn't difficult to figure out but Wangji had done plenty of things that surprised him in his later

years. Sizhui was fairly easy to understand since he was young and honest, while Jingyi could barely lie - try as hard as he may - but Lan Qiren could never figure out people like Wei Wuxian or Jin Guangyao. He had also never tried to get to know Wen Ruohan in the past.

Now he mentally added A Zhao, soon to be known as Wen Zhuliu to the list of people whose image was different from his expectations. Was this really the future Core-Melting Hand, the man who always seemed cold and ruthless? Who would ever think that the young Wen Zhuliu would be this clingy?

“We are going to look for a dangerous murderer, A Zhao. The man who attacked the temple you and your friends were staying at. Are you really sure you want to follow us?” Wen Ruohan asked again as they waved goodbye to Jiang Fengmian and Nie Yizhou.

A Zhao nodded. He hugged Wen Ruohan’s arm. “I want to stay with Han Ge and Ren Ge.”

Lan Qiren, “....”

Wei Changze was surely laughing at him now in silence. Now that Lan Qiren had learned about Nie Yizhou’s gossipy nature, no doubt the story would spread across all five major sects soon. Lan Qiren just had to make sure he could find an excuse to enter seclusion later, preferably for the next three years until the gossip died down. Otherwise he wouldn’t have the face to see anyone, knowing what they were thinking.

They had split into two, their priorities being to search for Zhao Wu and to assist Qingheng Jun. Nie Yizhou and Jiang Fengmian were each going to their respective sects to get more help to search for Zhao Wu and to track the madman. Cangse Sanren, the best painter among them, had gotten A Zhao to describe Zhao Wu’s appearance so she could sketch his face to be distributed to the disciples. Their search however was to remain a covert mission kept only among those in the know, for Zhao Wu might try to hide more if he found out cultivators were after him.

The last lead about the merchant that Wen Ruohan heard came from a small village not too far from Dafan Mountain, called Húdié Village. In the past it was known to grow a certain plant that attracted many beautiful butterflies, hence the origin of the village’s name. It was said that any couple who encountered two butterflies flying together would be destined in a happy marriage, hence a lot of young people also came to the village to pray for a good match or a joyful married life.

The village generated most of its income from silk and linen trading, and was also famous for its abundance of seamstresses. In fact not just seamstresses, a lot of the villagers were also in the business of wedding apparels and crafting other wedding items. Hence the moment Lan Qiren stepped across the village gate, all he saw were young couples filling the market.

“ ... ”

“Oh welcome, young cultivators! Are you two looking to get blessings?” One of the villagers who noticed the five out-of-place people greeted them. “The temple of the butterfly goddess

is over there. No worries, she accepts prayers from cut-sleeves as well! Just last week there were two young ladies who came here to ask for blessings.”

“...” Why did this random villager immediately go to him and Wen Ruohan instead of Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren, who was standing just a couple feet away from them? The Wei couple was a genuine, soon-to-be couple!

“This place is pretty lively, I heard just a few days ago there was an attack from a madman?” Wen Ruohan asked.

The villager seemed surprised. “Young master, you’ve heard it already? Aiyah, it was a lot of trouble... luckily there was a couple who happened to be cultivators as well passing by this village and chased them away. Too bad the merchant died... ah, but the poor guy who died was actually from the nearby Mo Village, not a local here.”

“Are they still here?” Lan Qiren asked.

“Not anymore. An older gentleman in all white came to meet them two days ago, I haven’t seen them since. The older gentleman was very nice, he gave us some talismans to ward off evil,” the villager said and showed them the talisman, which he carried in his robes. “That reminds me, the older gentleman is dressed exactly like you, all white with a forehead ribbon.”

Lan Qiren examined the talisman. Added with the man’s description, no doubt this was the work of his uncle, Lan Fan. It seemed like Lan Fan had already come here and they had missed him by just a couple days. He must have left with Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing to continue the search for the demonic cultivator. The madman at this point had killed enough people that he may cultivate to become an actual demon. Once he became an actual demon, it would be even more difficult to track and eliminate him.

The villager sighed. “We should have built a temple for a martial god as well. Having a god to bless marriage is good for business, but not enough for safety.”

“Does this village have no cultivators or anything to counter evil at all?” Wei Changze asked.

The old man shook his head. “Few years ago there was a Daoist priest who stopped by and recommended us to worship a martial god we’ve never heard of, but he looked like a beggar and was only here to collect trash, so we declined. This village has been in peace for years, why would we start worshipping a no-name deity?”

“... This village doesn’t have any protection against evil, you should definitely build a temple for a martial god. You won’t always be lucky to have cultivators around too,” Lan Qiren said.

The villager hung his head down. “What a rotten luck... up until a few months ago we had a couple of young lads who could draw some talismans, but even they were gone too.”

Lan Qiren felt dread settling. Could it be... “What do you mean? Who were they? What do they look like?”

The man scratched his head. "I'm not too familiar. They both said they were travelling cultivators. The head monk took pity on them and let them stay at the goddess' temple for a while, and the young lads stayed there. The monk should know more."

The villager kindly directed them to the location of the temple. The four young cultivators and one child walked through the crowded marketplace. It was loud and boisterous, as if there had been no murder occurring several days ago. For a village supposedly peaceful, Lan Qiren was a little surprised this incident barely affected them. Being a small village relying heavily on trades, perhaps they thought whatever happened they could not lose their spirits, lest they lose their income.

He had been holding A Zhao's hand to make sure he would not lose him from the crowd. His steps halted when he noticed A Zhao's head was turned and the child was looking at one of the stalls selling children's toys.

Ah.

A Zhao was a lot older than Sizhui when he was first brought to Cloud Recess, but he probably never had the chance to be pampered like other young children. Lan Qiren was reminded of the toy butterfly that Lan Sizhui had kept with him since childhood. It was the first toy he had, bought by Lan Wangji, back when he was still in Wei Wuxian's care. Even though Lan Sizhui had lost his memories after the terrible fever, he still treasured the toy and kept it with him to adulthood.

He pulled A Zhao away from the crowd and walked him over to the toy stall. "Which one do you want?"

At the side, Wen Ruohan looked at him, his eyes wide with surprise.

Even Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren had stopped walking.

A Zhao's eyes lit up. "Are you going to buy it for me?"

Lan Qiren nodded. A Zhao smiled and Lan Qiren was a little stunned. It was perhaps the first time he saw A Zhao smiling widely like that.

The boy pointed at one of the pinwheel toys. The paper blades were coloured light blue and bright red. "This one!"

Lan Qiren paid for the toy. It was no big deal, he told himself. The toy was cheap and it took no more than half an incense stick to purchase it.

When he turned to rejoin the group, he froze once again, looking at Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan was smiling, but it wasn't his usual, teasing smile.

It was almost like the smile Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji often shared with each other, and Lan Qiren did not like this. He did not like how his heart was beating too fast upon seeing the smile. He did not like how his cheeks were getting warm. He did not like how at that

moment, he thought Wen Ruohan looked so beautiful. He did not like how he was secretly desiring to see the same smile on his face forever.

“That was nice of you, RenRen,” Wen Ruohan commented.

Lan Qiren desperately chased away all the weird thoughts occupying his head. When it failed, he looked away and cleared his throat. “It was nothing.”

They continued walking but Lan Qiren’s face was still feeling warm. He flinched a little when he felt warm breath against his ear as Wen Ruohan suddenly leaned in to whisper;

“RenRen, you keep making me fall for you each time.”

He ignored it.

He tried to.

His ears were burning, perhaps his face as well.

Fortunately it wasn’t too long until the temple of the butterfly goddess finally came into view, otherwise Lan Qiren would combust just from being in close proximity with Wen Ruohan. At that time he could no longer think about anything else other than the man, that he kept chanting sutras in his head.

The monk greeted them at the door with a pleased smile. “Welcome, young cultivators. Are you here to pray to the goddess?”

Lan Qiren parted his lips. “We are here to-”

“We are,” Wei Changze said, cutting him off.

Lan Qiren scowled at the other. Wei Changze shook his head. “Second Young Master Lan, we are imposing on them, should we not pay some respect to the deity of this temple?”

What Wei Changze said made sense so Lan Qiren did not argue. Cangse Sanren showed A Zhao how to kneel down to pray, and the five of them all knelt in front of the goddess statue. They also burned some incense. Lan Qiren could not think of anything to pray for to the goddess of love and marriage. His eyes accidentally landed on Wen Ruohan praying beside him and he immediately shut his eyes. He tried to picture his brother and Bai Yiqing in his mind, and prayed for the couple to be happy this time.

He opened his eyes.

And saw vivid glimpses of two butterflies fluttering before him.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes.

There was nothing.

Was it just an imagination? Or were the butterflies blessing Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren?

“Where do you come from, esteemed young cultivators?” The monk asked, serving them some tea.

Wei Changze thanked him. “We came from different places, but met at Gusu. Do you happen to have seen anyone like us?”

The monk’s face changed. He sighed. “Young cultivators, if your intention is to search for the two young lads, please just give up. Let the two youngsters live their own happy life.”

Lan Qiren, “??”

“The two have suffered enough, they eloped with nothing but the clothes on their back and they had to escape with only the clothes on their back too. The goddess has blessed their union, please let them be in peace,” the monk added.

“Hold on, what are you talking about? Eloped?” Lan Qiren stopped him.

The monk looked confused in turn. “Aren’t you young masters looking for your brother, who eloped with another man? I thought that was the case, since this young master over here resembles the young lad,” he said, gesturing at Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan’s eyes widened. Even Lan Qiren was astonished - because there was only one person, who was also a travelling cultivator, who resembled the Qishan Wen heir.

Cangse Sanren fished out the sketch of Zhao Wu she had made from her pouch and showed it to the monk. “What about the other young lad? Does he look like this?”

The monk squinted his eyes. “Ah, yes, that’s the other young man, indeed.”

“... And when you say they eloped... hold on, did they really elope? They didn’t just happen to come here for a shelter together?” Wen Ruohan asked.

“They didn’t tell us initially why they were here. It was a dark rainy day, they were both drenched and hungry, so this old monk let them in to stay for the night. Two or three days after that several people in grey came looking for them, and the two young men begged this old monk to hide them, lest they’d be forced to go home and marry women of their family’s choice,” the monk told the story.

The five visitors looked at each other.

Zhao Wu and Wen Lin - Wen Ruohan’s brother - had likely met by coincidence somehow. They were both being chased, and in a village where people worshipped a goddess of love and marriage, what other better way to hide themselves than to pretend that they were a pair of lovers trying to escape arranged marriage? Later on after they no longer found the need to play fake lovers, they parted ways - Zhao Wu going somewhere else and Wen Lin to Huanying Village.

“Ah, that must be my brother’s secret lover... I am ashamed to admit that while I have known about this man, I did not know the nature of their relationship,” Wen Ruohan quickly said.

“It must not be easy for your brother, I pray that the young master and his family will one day accept their union,” the old monk nodded.

Wen Ruohan’s expression turned grim. “This one must thank everyone for sheltering my brother while he was here, but... unfortunately, my brother has already passed away.”

The monk gasped, and expressed his condolences. “May your brother find his happiness in the afterlife and be reunited with his lover. Ah, would you like to have the items he left behind then?”

“He left behind something?” Lan Qiren was surprised.

The monk brought them over to an empty room used to shelter some guests. It was a very simple, modest room, lined with a straw mat, a small desk, and a shelf. The monk picked up a small bundle wrapped in cloth and handed it to Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan unwrapped the bundle.

Lan Qiren’s entire body went numb as his eyes fell on the stack of books and papers. They appeared to be research notes.

The notes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Those were notes. Lan Qiren picked up one of the papers and examined it briefly. His eyes widened. Sure enough, they were cultivation manuals for an unorthodox method, that involved manipulation and a different way of nurturing the golden core. Within the paper, was a small note on the core-melting technique.

The monk had kept this for months and only gave them these papers because of Wen Ruohan's connection to Wen Lin, recognizing their resemblance. If Wen Ruohan had been tracking his dead brother before as well, then it was highly possible that even in his original timeline, he had found his way here and obtained these research notes. That would explain how Wen Zhuliu was able to develop his core-melting technique.

Wei Changze might be right. If Master Zhao or Xue Yanzi had started researching on manipulating resentful energy or body possession, these notes, that had fallen into Wen Ruohan's hands, was likely the source of his knowledge and the reason why he was able to create the living puppets using Yin Iron. It did not make sense for anything deviant to be passed down from Wen Mao, a righteous cultivator who was against any form of evil and crooked path.

"Do you recognize this, A Zhao? Does it look like your Wu Ge or Master Zhao's writing?" Lan Qiren asked, showing the papers to A Zhao.

A Zhao shook his head. "Bai Shijie or Xue Shixiong writes everything. Wu Ge's handwriting doesn't look that nice, he only learned writing after Master Zhao took us in."

"It's A Lin's handwriting," Wen Ruohan suddenly supplied.

Lan Qiren looked at him, eyes wide.

"We had the same calligraphy teacher, I'd know. Looks like their relationship is a lot closer than we thought, if Zhao Wu trusted A Lin to copy the notes for him. Perhaps he couldn't write all that well, so he dictated the words and had A Lin write them down for him," said Wen Ruohan.

Cangse Sanren hummed. "Some of the books have been drenched with mud. Do you think the scattered papers were copies to replace the damaged pages that Zhao Wu hastily and desperately made to preserve the knowledge while they were still fresh in his memories?"

"He could either plan to return here and retrieve the notes, or to have someone else come pick it up later. Whatever it is, we shouldn't leave this here," Wei Changze said.

Wen Ruohan nodded. He stored the notes into his storage pouch. "I'll look over these later."

Wei Changze and Lan Qiren both exchanged a wary glance. They couldn't tell Wen Ruohan to let either of them have the notes, since the notes belonged to neither of them. Moreover, if Wen Lin and Zhao Wu had possibly performed their bows during their stay at the temple, then it was Wen Ruohan's right to keep one of the last things left by his late brother and possibly brother-in-law.

It suddenly occurred to Lan Qiren that if Wen Lin had been more than just a comrade and pretend lovers with Zhao Wu, then he might also have to escape from the Yueyang Chang cultivators. Being on the run from his own clan, he could no longer rely on Qishan Wen's influence to avoid trouble. If Wen Lin had been the one to divert Chang Clan from chasing Zhao Wu, that would explain how he was already in a terrible condition even prior to reaching Huanying Village.

More so if he had tried out the unorthodox cultivation method out of curiosity while he was together with Zhao Wu. That could have ruined his own heart and body.

Lan Qiren would have to keep a tight watch over Wen Ruohan to make sure the man won't be attempting anything stupid, such as manipulating the Yin Iron for his perusal. That would be the devastating start to his descent to madness.

They expressed their gratitude to the monk, then went to find an inn to stay for the night.

The old man who owned the inn stared at them for a long time, scrunching his face. "... We have two rooms left," he said.

Ah, good. At least there were more than one room available. Then Lan Qiren recalled that Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren were with them. She would be taking one room with A Zhao, so that left Lan Qiren stuck with his two tormentors - the shameless flirt and the gremlin madman. Nevertheless they had no choice and so asked for the two rooms - one to accommodate two people and the other for three.

A Zhao pouted. "I want to stay with Ren Ge and Han Ge."

"Maiden Liang and Young Master Wei aren't married yet, they can't stay together," Lan Qiren said.

Wei Changze coughed, hearing the word 'yet'. He wasn't sure if Lan Qiren had forgotten that Cangse Sanren was unaware that she was his future wife, or if Lan Qiren had purposely implied something in his words just to get back at him for teasing the young master of Lan Clan.

"... Can't they just get married here, then?" A Zhao asked.

Cangse Sanren laughed. "Well A Zhao, Jiejie didn't bring the money to buy a wedding dress, so I can't get married."

Wei Changze; "....."

He thought the wedding dress was not the primary concern here.

"Ren Ge and Han Ge are rich, just borrow from them!" A Zhao quipped.

Cangse Sanren rubbed his head. "Well, you mustn't borrow money you can't return, A Zhao."

A Zhao blinked. "But Master Zhao always borrowed money and never returned them."

"... Really?"

"Mm. He borrowed the money from Bai Shijie to buy roasted chicken or dried squid. He never returned them."

"..."

"There are some examples that you should follow, and some that you should not. Borrowing money and not returning it is not one you should," Lan Qiren lectured.

"Well said, RenRen. Let's bring this conversation into the room, shall we? We can discuss the sleeping arrangement later..." Wen Ruohan's voice paused as he opened the door.

At one glance, the room looked relatively normal - except that there were rose petals scattered on the bright red beddings, scented candles on the side tables and lining near the window, a jar filled with wine and a pair of cups on the table, as well as a life-size explicit depiction of a half-naked man penetrating a half-naked woman painted directly on the wall.

Fuck, this was a room for a couple on honeymoon! They could remove the roses and wine, but they couldn't remove the wall! Lan Qiren quickly covered A Zhao's eyes with his hand and incoherent noises spewed from his mouth before he managed to utter, "What in the world is this?!"

"... What about the other room?" Wen Ruohan asked.

Wei Changze entered the other room and glanced around. He exhaled with relief. "It is a normal room, no paintings. A Zhao should stay here."

"There are three beds in the normal room, though. It can't be just me and A Zhao in the normal room, unless you three men want to get frisky tonight," Cangse Sanren grinned.

Wei Changze had a glint in his eyes. "The room for three has a folding screen and the three beds are away from one another. Maiden Liang and I can stay in the room with A Zhao, there should be no problem."

Lan Qiren choked. Wouldn't that mean he and Wen Ruohan would have to stay in that red room?! "But, but..."

"A Zhao can't stay in that room with Maiden Cangse, and neither can I with her. Even if we find a curtain big enough to cover the painting, it can still be seen by accident. Young Master Wen and Second Young Master Lan are already promised to each other, this is the best arrangement," Wei Changze reasoned.

Sure, his explanation made more sense. Lan Qiren couldn't stay in the normal room with Cangse Sanren, he could not stand her. He also refused to room with Wei Changze, who would no doubt be mentally harassing him with his mad ideas. He had shared a room and a bed with Wen Ruohan several times, this was just one more night to add. Still, those were several times too many! Lan Qiren could not help but wonder if he had done something to offend the deities above, to be put into this predicament.

The group of five gathered in the normal room for the discussion. Wen Ruohan ordered for several dishes to be brought over to the room. As usual A Zhao ate very slowly and hesitantly that Lan Qiren had to pile up more meat and vegetables into his bowl. He was looking a lot better compared to the day they first picked him up but it would still take a few more weeks to get him plumper.

After the meal, Wen Ruohan finally stacked up the papers they collected earlier on the table. A Zhao sat away from them in a different table, playing with his pinwheels, as they feared the topic they were about to discuss might be too much for him.

"I have never seen a cultivation manual this unorthodox," Wen Ruohan said as he examined the notes.

"This method cultivates the golden core differently. It would require only a certain type of constitution, or the user would be killed. It does, however, produce astounding result if successful," said Cangse Sanren as she looked through.

"Have you heard of anything similar to this, Maiden Liang?" Wei Changze asked.

Cangse Sanren shook her head. "The way our current generation develops our golden core is different. My shifu cultivated hers differently as well. It takes longer for her to do so, but it also results in a stronger, more stable core, which is how she achieves immortality."

"Qinghe Nie uses a sabre instead of a sword. Ruoyu's branch practices only healing cultivation. Gusu Lan has their musical cultivation. Of course there will be distinction in cultivation methods across different sects, but our basis will always be the same, when developing our golden cores," Wen Ruohan said.

"However, this method is already different, even before the core formation, ideally from the mid qi condensation. Once someone has entered the late stages of foundation establishment, it is impossible to achieve it anymore and any attempt will only result in a severe backlash that can completely destroy the body and the golden core," Lan Qiren uttered.

Horror nestled inside his mind. This was the basis of the core-melting technique, it was a technique created by accident, from observing the backlash of a failed cultivation method. What Wen Zhuliu did was basically forcing his victim to manipulate their spiritual energy according to the unorthodox method described in the manual and due to the incompatibility, the victim's core would be melted as a result of the backlash.

"He must be very obsessed with this method, if this is the only thing he has been researching," Cangse Sanren said.

Wen Ruohan shook his head. “Not the only thing. Looks like Master Zhao is also researching body possession technique.”

Lan Qiren and Wei Changze were both stupefied.

“According to his notes here, it seems like he is trying to find a way to transfer his soul and memories to a different body, by imitating and modifying the technique used to summon spirits. I’m guessing Master Zhao being a cultivator of an advanced stage would be unable to practice the cultivation method he created himself, so...”

Lan Qiren heaved. “He plans to transfer his soul to a younger body with the right constitution.”

The adults fell silent for a moment. Lan Qiren stared at the notes emptily, thinking of how messed up the situation was. Fortunately A Zhao wasn’t paying attention to their conversation since he was still playing with the pinwheels, and perhaps he was a tad too young to understand what this entailed - but it was likely that Master Zhao did not pick up a bunch of children out of compassion.

Not only was it to gain more young disciples so he could continue receiving Chang Ran’s support, it was also for him to find a suitable body for his experiment. It was truly sickening. It made sense why Chang Ran was so against it and even called him mad. However, now Lan Qiren couldn’t help thinking to what extent was Bai Yiqing aware of her master’s plan? She loved children - Lan Qiren knew that. She treasured Xichen and Wangji so much. Would someone like her be willing to let her master carry on with this sick plan?

Wei Changze exhaled. “Well, did it work?”

Lan Qiren eyed Wen Ruohan. “Master Zhao was killed, then Xue Yanzi killed Chang Ran and possessed his body, but... do you think it was actually Master Zhao taking over Xue Yanzi and then Chang Ran? After all, what Chang Ran saw was Xue Yanzi, he couldn’t have known if it was Master Zhao who actually killed him,” he said.

Wen Ruohan pondered for a moment. “We will never know that, unless we can find a way to identify the spirit inside. It could be truly Xue Yanzi inside. However, based on these research notes, I can see why the madman keeps killing and going around places. He is still searching for the right body that fits the requirements and he is failing.”

“What are the requirements?” Wei Changze asked.

“The body has to be sturdy enough to accommodate the spirit. Preferably of similar age and gender. Most ideally, blood-related,” Wen Ruohan read off the notes. “Well, if he’s in a constant state of qi deviation due to the backlash and his mind is muddled, it makes sense that he can’t get them right.”

Wei Changze drummed his fingers. “So, where did Master Zhao come from again?”

“Anping,” Lan Qiren recalled.

“... Do you think he will eventually go back there to look for someone blood-related to him?”

“...” Lan Qiren hummed. Bai Yiqing indeed spoke in a dialect of that region. He looked at A Zhao and called his name to get his attention. “A Zhao, does Master Zhao speak in the same dialect as your Bai Shijie?”

A Zhao blinked. “No? I think Master Zhao and Bai Shijie speak differently.”

If he wasn’t speaking in the same dialect as Bai Yiqing, that meant he was born and raised in a different city, before moving to Anping and meeting his two disciples. “Do you know where Master Zhao is from, or if he has any family members?”

A Zhao’s eyebrows knit as he tried to concentrate. “Mmm... I don’t know, I haven’t been to many places. But I think the way he speaks is similar to Han Ge?”

“... A Qishan dialect?” Lan Qiren uttered.

Wen Ruohan shut his eyes and sighed. He rubbed his temples. “... No wonder he keeps alternating between the cities in relatively close proximity. Yueyang, Kuizhou, Yi City, Yiling, this place too.”

“His mind is not completely sound but those places are imprinted in his memories,” Wei Changze said.

“So... does this mean our next destination is Qishan?” Cangse Sanren asked.

“I suppose. Well, might as well go back for now. There’s a special hidden room in Nightless City, I can keep these notes sealed there so they’ll never see the light of the day,” said Wen Ruohan, packing up the scattered papers.

Wei Changze and Lan Qiren both exchanged a grim look. Lan Qiren knew what he was trying to convey. He had to find a way later to convince Wen Ruohan to maybe burn those notes forever, or seal them in a way that Wen Ruohan himself would never be able to read them on his own.

The papers might actually see the light of the day again and the result won’t be pretty for all of them. With their next destination finally decided, they decided to call it a day for the moment.

“A Ze, do you want to walk around the market before dinner time comes?” Cangse Sanren asked.

“I...”

“Come on!” She pulled his hand and dragged him out before he could even give an answer.

That left the three of them in the room. Wen Ruohan called the innkeeper over to ask for a bathtub so A Zhao could wash up before dinner.

“What about Zhao Wu?” Lan Qiren asked.

“We have no lead for him. He left in such a hurry and did not even take his belongings with him. Tomorrow we should go and talk to the monk again,” said Wen Ruohan. “If A Lin and Zhao Wu were more than just fake lovers, perhaps either one would try to reunite with the other. We know where A Lin ended up, so we can trace his location from there. Well... it’s still going to be not far off Qishan, nonetheless.”

“How do you know if they really are that close?”

“He is entrusting someone he met on the road with to copy pages from a cultivation manual for him. It’s not a cheap fake manual sold at the market. It’s a genuine manual and research notes, known by a limited number of people, produced by a dead man. If it were me, I wouldn’t let just anyone even know that I have it,” said Wen Ruohan.

What Wen Ruohan said made sense. Lan Qiren hummed. “They were playing fake lovers, so they must have prayed to the temple goddess as well. Do you think they saw the butterflies too?”

“Too...?”

Lan Qiren froze.

Wen Ruohan stared at him, eyes wide.

Lan Qiren swallowed hard. His face was burning from the embarrassment of having uttered something he did not intend to let a single soul know.

“RenRen, did you...?”

“I saw nothing,” Lan Qiren instantly replied and looked away.

“RenRen, look at me.”

“No.”

“Come on, look at me and tell it to my face that you saw nothing. Lying is forbidden, isn’t it?”

“We’re not in Cloud Recesses,” Lan Qiren said. He then mentally berated himself, because wasn’t this just basically admitting that he would be lying if he said he saw nothing?

Fortunately the innkeeper arrived right on time to announce that the bath was ready, breaking the weird tension lingering in the air. Lan Qiren quickly ushered A Zhao to the bath so he did not have to stay in the same space for Wen Ruohan any longer. It would be good to at least take his mind off the fact that he was going to have to share that accursed room with Wen Ruohan tonight.

He helped to scrub and lather the soap on A Zhao’s hair, yet his mind still could not forget the faint glimpse of the butterflies. Those had to be illusions. He refused to believe that the reason he was single for decades in his original timeline was because his real soulmate had turned into a maniacal tyrant who sent his son to raze his home.

“Oww, Ren Ge...”

“Ah, sorry,” Lan Qiren quickly apologized when he realized he had been scrubbing A Zhao’s back too harshly. The Lan Clan arm training was rigorous, he should be careful or he might hurt A Zhao.

“Is Ren Ge thinking about Han Ge?” A Zhao asked.

Lan Qiren’s eyes twitched. “Why would you say that?”

“Ren Ge, you always have that same look when you look at Han Ge,” said A Zhao.

Lan Qiren’s hands petrified for a split second. What kind of face had he been making when he was with Wen Ruohan? He then bit his lips. A Zhao had not been with them for that long. What could a young boy like this possibly know? Lan Qiren had trained himself to not lose composure, to hide his emotions. Admittedly he was not as good at that as Wangji (Wangji’s stiff face was perhaps a bad result of too much training, in fact), but he could not fathom why his heart would always be beating strangely lately whenever he looked at Wen Ruohan.

Even though ironically he was also feeling more comfortable walking alongside the man.

“... I think my fingers have turned into dried jujubes, Ren Ge,” said A Zhao, a sign that he should leave the bathtub already.

Cangse Sanren returned half drunk.

She decided to challenge some local men to a drinking competition just to win a brocade cloak. It was a fine fabric sure, with beautiful butterfly motifs embroidered on it, and it was probably more expensive than any cloak Cangse Sanren could afford. While Wen Ruohan was impressed that a slim, young woman was able to ingest that much alcohol. Lan Qiren at this point was unfazed, as he had his fair share of experience seeing Wei Wuxian downing jars of the Emperor's Smile.

Wei Changze, who had helped her to walk back to the inn without getting them in any more trouble, mercilessly dropped her onto the floor as soon as they reached their room. “I’m surprised you haven’t collapsed yet.”

Cangse Sanren grinned and hiccupped a little. “Ehehe, I have my secret. But why are you letting me drop down just like that, A Ze?”

“Why don’t you question your decision first?”

“I won the cloak for you, A Ze!”

“It’s a woman’s cloak, and what use would I have for that?”

“I’m going to give it to you as a betrothal gift, Wei Gege.”

“... You’re speaking nonsense, you must be truly drunk now,” said Wei Changze, and he took out a rope from his storage pouch.

Lan Qiren nearly spat out his tea. “What are you doing?!”

“Yeah, you should give me some soup to sober up, Wei Gege, what are you doing?!” Cangse Sanren shrieked.

“Restraining a drunk person, what else?” said Wei Changze.

Restraining? She’s clearly enjoying it! Lan Qiren thought, looking at Cangse Sanren’s face. “She’s going to sober up in a bit, there’s no need to do that!”

Wei Changze frowned. “It’s the only way I can keep her quiet.”

You’re falling into her trap, Lan Qiren silently lamented. *You two father and son are more alike than I thought. Your mind works fast when it comes to scheming the most ridiculous things but you’re both oblivious to these things.*

“I’d love to introduce you to Ruoyu, Maiden Liang. He’s always so stern and pragmatic, he needs some fun in his life,” said Wen Ruohan.

Well, Wen Ruoyu’s daughter was indeed going to have Wei Wuxian’s shenanigans forced on her in that other future.

“Speaking of your family, Young Master Wen - are you going to be okay? I imagine Sect Leader Wen won’t be happy that not only you declined the arranged marriage, you’re out here investigating a case without his knowledge,” Wei Changze asked. Not to mention, he was taking a boy of unknown origin with him as well.

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “I might get disowned.”

“Do not make ridiculous jokes, Wen Ruohan. Won’t Sect Leader Wen be truly angered?” Lan Qiren asked.

“I’m not joking. Whoever he deems useless for failing to heed his order will be weeded out,” Wen Ruohan laughed.

Lan Qiren spluttered. “How can you be so nonchalant about this? He’s not going to let you off easily, is he?”

“I’m fine as long as I have you. Or will you no longer look at me if I lose my wealth and status?”

“Who cares about that? What about you? Aren’t you going to lose your home?!” Lan Qiren questioned.

Wen Ruohan chuckled. A small smile appeared on his face.

“Exactly that. I’ve already found a new home. I don’t mind losing the old one.”

Chapter End Notes

WRH: I'm gonna light 800 incense sticks for the butterfly goddess

I will claim you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Changze woke up the moment he heard the bustling sound of people setting up their stalls and ox carts being pushed. He looked to his side and saw A Zhao also scrunching his face, seemingly about to wake up as well. He stretched his limbs a little before sitting up and getting off bed. Hearing the light snores from the other bed behind the folding screen, it seemed like Cangse Sanren was still in the dreamland.

They had planned to set out for Qishan this morning. Knowing Lan Qiren, the young master of Gusu Lan must have woken up at five in the morning as usual. Judging from the brightness outside, it should be well over two hours since Lan Qiren's usual time to wake up. Wei Changze lightly shook A Zhao's shoulders to wake him up, then went to knock on the folding screen.

"Maiden Liang, it's morning. Time to wake up," he said.

"Urrghh... five more minutes..."

"... You shouldn't have stayed up all night trying to peep, then trying to invent a talisman to listen in when you failed," Wei Changze uttered with a deadpan voice.

He could hear a light grunt and a yawn in reply. "Mm... what time is it?"

"Second Young Master Lan may have been awake for two hours already."

"So still early by normal people standard. Let me sleep!"

"We have a place to go. There's a mad cultivator on the loose. We should not waste time."

"We also should not fight a madman while sleep-deprived! I bet Second Young Master Lan and Young Master Wen are still asleep anyway, why bother them? Staying in that kind of room, they must have plucked each other last night!"

As much as Wei Changze would very much look forward to that happening, he doubted it. Lan Qiren had a face too thin to be doing that in the middle of an investigation, moreover with him, Cangse Sanren, and A Zhao in the next room. He knew Wei Changze would not miss the chance finding out if something had happened, why would he make a move? Wei Changze was just going to slowly plant some more interesting ideas in his head as they moved and wait for the magic to happen.

"I don't think that's happening."

There was a sound of sheets rustling. "Why don't you go and check on them."

She definitely just wanted an excuse to get an extra few minutes of sleep. Wei Changze sighed and went to the other room anyway. He knocked on it several times, waiting for the two to come out.

Lan Qiren opened the door. It seemed like he was just done getting dressed. Wei Changze smiled and decided to just teasingly said, “Good morning. Did you pluck the cabbage last night?”

He waited for the eye roll, for the retort.

Lan Qiren’s face however, instantly flushed red instead of distorting from anger.

Wei Changze blinked. “Hold on, did something really happen? Did you really deflower him-”

“No such thing happened! Nothing happened!” Lan Qiren exclaimed and stomped away angrily.

“....” Wei Changze was even more intrigued now, but decided to let it go until Lan Qiren had calmed down.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, since the two people who usually did the talking - Wen Ruohan and Cangse Sanren were both not talking much. Cangse Sanren who had stayed up until midnight was yawning, and Wen Ruohan did not seem to be in a bad mood, although he did look a little sleepy. If Wei Changze had less self-restraint he would have been interrogating these two already.

They returned to the temple of the butterfly goddess again and Wei Changze noticed that Lan Qiren was avoiding Wen Ruohan’s gaze. Curiosity was killing him but Wei Changze shut his mouth knowing he would not get an answer. The monk welcomed them warmly when Wen Ruohan asked if he could hear more about his brother and his ‘lover’.

As the villager whom they first met mentioned, Wen Lin and Zhao Wu had stayed in the temple momentarily and helped make some simple protective talismans for the villagers. The monk showed them one of the talismans they had made, and it was just a basic protective charm, nothing special or unorthodox about it.

“How close were they?” Wen Ruohan asked.

The monk blinked. “As close as a married couple should be, of course,” he said.

“... How close is that?”

The monk laughed. “This monk dared not asking them intimate personal questions and the young men have not done anything improper in this place. However, they were calling each other ‘husband’ and left the temple on the same day too.”

Of course they wouldn’t do anything in front of the monks, Lan Qiren thought. Who would be that shameless, unless their name is Wei Wuxian? “Do you have any idea where they were headed to and why they were leaving?”

The monk shook his head. “Nothing unusual happened that day as far as this monk can remember. Worshippers came in as usual, from different parts of the land so this old monk wouldn't know if anyone hostile to the two of them came. The two only mentioned they had to escape before their family caught them, and left just like that. I have no clue where they planned to head to at that time.”

With no other clue to assist them, they thanked the monk and left the temple. It seemed like Wen Lin and Zhao Wu had lived, or at least faked living a blissful life as a married couple there before fleeing without any sign. The only clue they had would be Huanying Village and even then, Wen Lin had only introduced himself as a rogue cultivator without even giving the villagers his name. Seeing that there was no other choice for the moment, they decided to move on with their plan to track the demonic cultivator along with Zhao Wu in Qishan.

They were planning to continue their journey to Qishan on foot, when they happened to encounter a merchant pulling an ox cart on their way, who was also heading to the same destination. The merchant was willing to let them ride along with him, when he found out that they were cultivators. Perhaps he thought it was just neat since he got to have free protection by the cultivators. The four cultivators and one boy hopped onto the cart, thanking the merchant.

“With all of you, young cultivators with me, this old man doesn't need to feel afraid, haha!” The merchant laughed.

“We are more thankful to you, uncle. The poor child doesn't have to walk too far anymore,” said Wei Changze. He noticed some fabric slipping out from one of the boxes carried in the cart. “Are you selling these rolls of silk to Qishan?”

“Ah, yes. A big influential family placed an order for many rolls of silk and red fabric. I'm sending these to the seamstress in Qishan. Have any of you heard of the Wen Clan?”

Wen Ruohan instantly coughed. Lan Qiren made a strangled sound.

Wei Changze frowned. “We know them a little. Is someone from the Wen Clan getting married?”

“I'm not too familiar with them either. I only heard that the eldest son is getting married and they're requesting extra rolls for the garments and the beddings. Everything must be of high quality. They're paying handsomely too,” said the old man.

Wen Ruohan cleared his throat. “Are you sure it's the eldest son? Did they say his name?”

“I don't know his name but I'm certain they said it's the eldest son.”

The eldest son of the main branch of Wen Clan was none other than Wen Ruohan, the man who was currently riding the ox cart with them, the man who had pretty much escaped his matchmaking session. The only other young male of the Wen Clan from the same generation who was older than Wen Ruohan was his cousin Wen Ruoyu, and Wen Ruoyu was already married. That meant either Wen Ruohan was already disowned from the family without any

notice, or Sect Leader Wen was intent on making him follow the orders, disregarding his protest.

“What other rumors have you heard about the Wen Clan?” Wen Ruohan asked.

“That they’re rich and powerful, with many followers. Us common folks don’t know that much about the cultivators, especially people from a small village like us. Most of the time we usually hear about their predecessors, not much about their current members,” said the merchant. “Like the young cultivators who came the other day. I heard that they are from Gusu Lan? Young master in white, are you also from Gusu Lan?”

“I am,” Lan Qiren answered.

“Folks from Gusu Lan are all good-looking, ah? The elder gentleman from Gusu even gave me a talisman for free, he was very nice. Will it really work against the madman?”

“It should work. Speaking of the madman, do you remember what he looks like?” Lan Qiren asked.

“Oh, I remember, my wife was there during the incident and told me about it. He was very scary-looking, at one glance you’d think it was a walking corpse! His face was so sunken and blue, like there was no blood flowing in his veins at all. His hair was all over the place and looked like it was cut haphazardly. He was bleeding all over and there were maggots on his wound! It was so disgusting, all the young ladies who saw him fainted and the people who were near him all retched from the rotten smell!” The merchant described.

“... He’s near his limit. We should be careful,” said Wen Ruohan to his travel companions.

Based on the merchant’s description, it seemed like the madman was about to decompose to the point of unable to utilize the stolen body anymore. Sooner or later whatever inside the body might get desperate and would possess just anyone to escape death. This would be dangerous especially to Qingheng Jun, Bai Yiqing, and Lan Fan, who were tracking the madman.

“But what’s going on with your father? Has he already disowned you or is he going to literally drag you to your wedding even if you disagree?” Cangse Sanren whispered at Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “I think he’s planning to capture me and make me return. My other living younger brother is only sixteen and is not even half as strong nor is he half as handsome as me. Not the ideal heir, hm.”

“... Very confident, aren’t you,” Lan Qiren humphed.

Wen Ruohan grinned and scooted over closer to Lan Qiren, pushing his shoulder against Lan Qiren’s. “RenRen, aren’t you going to save me from my father?”

Lan Qiren only looked away, but his ears turned red.

“Come on, what happened to yesterday’s promise?”

“Shut up!” Lan Qiren lost his composure and Wen Ruohan only recoiled with laughter.

Wei Changze raised an eyebrow. “Exactly what happened to the two of you last night?”

Lan Qiren buried his face in his palms. Oh, how he wished he could erase the memory from his brain!

******flashback******

The night was silent. The boisterous sound of the crowd-filled market was gone as the sky turned dark. Downstairs, people were beginning to either leave for their home or retire for the night. Unlike the other inns that Lan Qiren had been staying at ever since he left Cloud Recess, the walls of this inn were thick enough that he could not hear much of anything outside.

Though, this time he was not particularly grateful for that. The only reason he was getting this privacy was because the room he was staying in was designed for a newlywed couple!

"RenRen, care for a cup?"

Wen Ruohan grinned, swishing the small cup of rose wine from where he was sitting at the table. Lan Qiren glared at him through the folding screen where he was changing his clothes to sleep. Even this accursed thing was too thin! With the candle lights all around, one could see the silhouette of the person changing behind the screen! However they were both men, so Lan Qiren gritted his teeth and decided that it should be fine if Wen Ruohan was only seeing his silhouette. It wasn't like their bodies were so different.

They already sat in a bathtub together, and Wen Ruohan had seen and touched his unclothed body-

Lan Qiren wanted to curse so bad.

“You’re drinking, when we are heading to Qishan tomorrow?” Lan Qiren said.

“A small jar like this won’t get me drunk. I can barely taste the alcohol, I’m beginning to think this isn’t wine but just a slightly fermented sweet rose tea,” Wen Ruohan laughed, then suddenly paused. “... Oh, what if it is actually just an old jar of sweet rose tea that they kept for too long and try to pass as alcohol?”

Lan Qiren snorted a little. Well, that would serve him right. He emerged and joined Wen Ruohan at the table, though opting for a cup of tea rather than the wine.

"Are you not going to try and do something about your father?" Lan Qiren asked. He wasn't sure how Wen Ruohan's other siblings or other candidates were compared to him, since they all died fairly young before Lan Qiren was even acquainted with any of them. However, based on Wen Ruoyu's words and his insistence of having Wen Ruohan as the next sect

leader, he could guess that either all of them were not as capable or had vastly different minds.

Wen Ruohan snorted. "What do you want me to do, apologize?"

"At this point I truly don't know whether you're just stupid or fearless."

Wen Ruohan smirked and put down the wine cup. "Or maybe I just have no choice."

"... Because you disobeyed his order."

Wen Ruohan sighed. "You don't have to feel guilty, RenRen. I'm practically already a traitor the moment I plotted against him, by stealing his relic and failing to capture the 'thief'. A Lin took the blame for me and now he's dead. Getting disowned is nothing."

"..."

"I still wouldn't have gone to the arranged marriage, you know," Wen Ruohan winked.

Liar, Lan Qiren thought. How else would you have gotten two children if not because you went to the arranged marriage and took the lady as your wife? If Lan Qiren hadn't interrupted him, Wen Ruohan might be exchanging wine cups and spending the night on the bed, lined with red bed sheets - with a woman who would bore his son. The thought of Wen Ruohan with another woman suddenly irked him so much.

He drowned another cup.

"... RenRen, that was my cup," Wen Ruohan uttered.

"... It's just sweet rose tea, isn't it?"

Wen Ruohan laughed. "Oh well, I suppose the alcohol content really is so low that you're able to tolerate it," he said, and took Lan Qiren's cup of tea instead, drinking it.

Lan Qiren hummed and nodded. "Mn."

"RenRen, are you really that upset? It's sweet that you're worried about me, but like I said, I'm not going anywhere."

"... Liar."

Wen Ruohan was about to pour himself another cup of tea, when Lan Qiren's answer suddenly surprised him a little. He paused, then put the teapot back onto its place. He looked at the young master of Gusu Lan, and was amused to see that he was pouting.

"If I weren't here, you would have gone to marry her. Have two sons," Lan Qiren grumbled.

"... I'm mistaken. You really are drunk, RenRen. Why don't we go to bed early tonight," said Wen Ruohan, pulling Lan Qiren's hand.

He led him to the large bed, carefully helping Lan Qiren to take off his boots. Lan Qiren glared at him. "Wen Ruohan, I would never let anyone touch me like this."

Wen Ruohan smirked. "I'm happy that I'm your first, RenRen."

"No wonder I was always alone."

"You really are drunk, RenRen."

"Wen Ruohan, did you see the butterflies?"

Wen Ruohan blinked. "The silver butterflies?"

"Tell me, did you see it or not?" Lan Qiren asked again.

"Why does it matter if I see them or not? Are you going to be upset if I don't see them?"

"Would you have seen it with your wife? Wouldn't you be here with your wife if not because of me?"

Wen Ruohan fell silent for a moment. He sat beside Lan Qiren. "You might be right. I might be married if not because I've met you."

Lan Qiren scowled. "I knew it. If not because of you-"

"RenRen-"

Lan Qiren looked down. "What would I do if I'm the only one seeing it? What should I do if my fated one is you but I'm not yours?"

Wen Ruohan's eyes grew wide. He slowly raised his hands to cup Lan Qiren's face.

Silence filled the room. There was nothing but the sound of a light breeze that blew some of the candles off, dimming the room. Flickering lights illuminated Lan Qiren's face and Wen Ruohan could see the light tint of pink on his cheeks. He swallowed hard.

"RenRen. Lan Qiren. Second Young Master Lan. It doesn't really matter to me. Even if I didn't see the butterfly, I've decided that my fated person is you. Nobody can change my mind about that," he said.

Lan Qiren looked back at him. "You might change your mind. People change. So will you."

Wen Ruohan smiled. "All you need to do is stay by my side. If there's anything about me that has changed so far, I know one thing - I believe I've genuinely fallen for you, RenRen."

He had flirted with him numerous times. He talked about marrying him. He boldly expressed his desire to stay with him. Many times, it didn't seem like Lan Qiren believed him and only thought he was teasing. Perhaps the first few times were indeed just him having fun but Wen Ruohan knew for a while now that his feelings were sincere.

Lan Qiren only looked like he was in a drunken daze - surely he won't even remember tonight. Which was fine with Wen Ruohan. If Lan Qiren couldn't remember, he would just say it again tomorrow, the day after, the week after, the month after, anytime he wanted. He would say it again and again, as many times as Lan Qiren would want. He would tell him, he would string words of affection for him until he blushed, until he would pretend as if he was annoyed, as usual.

Until one day, Lan Qiren couldn't bear acting like his heart wasn't racing anymore. Because Wen Ruohan could feel it. The rapid heartbeat. The small gasps. The warmth on his cheeks.

Lan Qiren let out a hiccup. He glared at Wen Ruohan, then suddenly placed both hands against the sides of Wen Ruohan's head. The latter blinked.

"Wen Ruohan... you're not escaping, you hear me? I won't let... you're not marrying anyone."

Wen Ruohan laughed. "Of course. Unless it's with RenRen, I'm not getting married."

"When we reach Qishan..." Lan Qiren's words were half slurred at this point. "If I ever see any woman with you, I'm going to tie my forehead ribbon around you."

"... Are you going to choke me with it?"

Lan Qiren humphed.

"I'm going to claim you in front of everyone."

Wen Ruohan froze.

His fingers moved, from caressing the soft cheeks, to linger around his jaw. One thumb pressed against the corner of Lan Qiren's mouth. Lan Qiren closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. Wen Ruohan could feel the world around him stopping. He couldn't breathe, mesmerized by the sight.

Slowly, he opened his mouth.

"RenRen, can I kiss you?"

Silence followed.

Lan Qiren scowled and opened his eyes.

Wen Ruohan waited for the answer nervously.

"You can't take it back."

It was better than Wen Ruohan thought.

He closed the distance between them and pressed their lips together.

Lan Qiren's lips was soft, cool, and pliant underneath his.

It was like something being ignited inside him, the moment he parted his lips to savour the lush plump ones before him. He left it briefly just to take a good look at Lan Qiren's face - flushed red and so darn beautiful, there were no words that could do it justice.

Unable to stop himself, he went in for a second kiss, slowly coaxing the other to allow him in. Lan Qiren seemed a little reluctant, before he eased himself and let Wen Ruohan pressed himself closer. Wen Ruohan ran his fingers through the silky ink-like hair as he tasted the sweet rose flavour on Lan Qiren's lips. He continued to nibble on the lips, before feeling Lan Qiren pushing his own tongue in. Pleased surprise overtook him and he tumbled into bed as Lan Qiren pushed him down.

Laying down, Wen Ruohan noticed the ceiling of the canopy bed had a painting of a couple pleasuring each other with their mouths. He gulped as he felt himself beginning to harden, for Lan Qiren was sitting right on top of him. "RenRen," he breathed.

Lan Qiren stared at him and placed a palm against his chest.

"Wen Ruohan."

"... Yes?"

"If I claim you now, will anyone ever dare to steal you?"

Wen Ruohan was burning with excitement. He was about to pull Lan Qiren down for another kiss, when the latter suddenly closed his eyes and promptly tumbled into the bed right next to him.

Wen Ruohan stilled. He could hear light snores.

"... RenRen?"

Lan Qiren had fallen asleep.

Leaving him here, with a hard-on and unable to move as the young master of Lan Clan had lied down with his head on his arm. Even more painful, his warm body was pressed right against Wen Ruohan and there was nothing he could do but stare at the ceiling with the erotic painting, the love of his life asleep and pinned against his body, and a hard-on that won't go away.

*** *flashback ends* ***

When they woke up the following morning, Lan Qiren pretended as if he remembered nothing. Which was very hard to do, considering this time he was drunk enough to lose inhibition but not drunk enough to forget what he had done.

He lightly pressed his fingers against his lips as he remembered the feeling of Wen Ruohan's warm, slightly chapped ones against his own.

He thought it was going to feel disgusting, yet here he was half wishing he wasn't drunk. Maybe if he wasn't drunk, he would have been disgusted instead of feeling good. Lan Qiren wanted to slap himself for even thinking it felt nice.

When he realized all the three others were looking at him with a gremlin smile on their faces, Lan Qiren barked, "Get lost!!!"

Chapter End Notes

WRH: (͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)

WCZ: (' ͡° ͜ʖ ͡° ͡° `)

CSSR: (' ͡° ͜ʖ ͡° ͡° `)

LQR: ʘ(͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)

A Zhao: adults are weird

ayyy it's RenRen and Han Gege's first kiss!

(͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)♥_(:3 ʘ ͜ʖ)_

Battle against the deviant cultivator

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Jiang Fengmian returned to Lotus Pier to gather some help tracking the demonic cultivator, he did not expect that they would have some guests. However, when he went to meet his parents, he was greeted by a group of Meishan Yu cultivators who were there to express their gratitude to Sect Leader Jiang. It appeared that they were escorting one of their prized disciples, Yu Zihua to meet Madam Jin of Lanling Jin. However, the group of young female disciples and one older chaperone were attacked on their way there. With their carriage wrecked and Yu Zihua's dress all torn up and stained with blood, they had no choice but to ask for Yunmeng Jiang's help to shelter them temporarily while they were recovering.

"How embarrassing it is for me to greet you in this state, Young Master Jiang," Yu Zihua said.

"Not at all. It must have been terrible for all of you," Jiang Fengmian said. "Are you in a rush, perhaps? We can help send a letter or a messenger to Lanling Jin to inform them of your predicament and possible delay, if you'd like."

"That would be very much appreciated. I imagine it will take some time for me to obtain a new, suitable dress for the occasion," Yu Zihua thanked him.

Jiang Fengmian nodded. He then asked, "If I may know, this occasion that you're speaking of..."

"A matchmaking meeting with Young Master Jin of Lanling Jin," she answered.

Ah, so the rumors were true. Madam Jin must be very frustrated with Jin Guangshan then, considering she had sought for the hands of the famed Meishan Yu to be her daughter-in-law and take control of her promiscuous son. Yu Zihua was undeniably beautiful - with creamy fair skin, sharp phoenix eyes, and delicate features. However, Jiang Fengmian could also tell that she was a force to reckon with. Aside from the spiritual sword, she also carried a bow on her back, she was no less of a warrior than any men he knew.

"Maiden Yu, you can even have one of my old dresses, if you don't mind," Madam Jiang offered. "It will be a little hard to look for a proper dress with limited time, though I'm sure anything will look good on someone so beautiful."

"Zihua cannot accept anything more, when you've helped us so much," she said.

"It isn't any trouble at all, Maiden Yu. Did you manage to catch the person attacking your entourage, by the way? Where were you attacked?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

"We had just gone past Yiling, when a mad man suddenly attacked us," Yu Zihua said. "We do not even know whether that person is a living man or a demon. He looks like a dead man,

yet he does not look like a demon either.”

Hearing the description, Jiang Fengmian’s eyes widened instantly. “Does the man have the stench of a rotting corpse, sunken eyes, bleeding from his orifices, and appears as if he is in a constant state of qi deviation?”

The Meishan Yu disciples were all surprised and looked at each other curiously. Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Jiang were also interested. They were already curious as to why Jiang Fengmian suddenly came back. Even if there were no lessons at the moment, the distance from Gusu to Yunmeng was not that close. However, they just did not have the opportunity to question their son since the disciples from Meishan Yu came without notice asking for help.

Yu Zihua narrowed her eyes. “Young Master Jiang, have you heard about this attacker before?”

Jiang Fengmian nodded. “I cannot disclose much details here, but this madman has been attacking and killing innocent people in multiple villages. In fact, Gusu Lan has already deployed several of their senior cultivators out to chase this man.”

Sect Leader Jiang was shocked to hear it. He scowled. “Why have we not heard about this man?”

Jiang Fengmian fiddled a little. “To be honest, I found out about it by accident too. Qingheng Jun and a Lan elder are actively pursuing this man, and Second Young Master Lan is working together with Wen Ruohan of Qishan Wen to investigate this case. I came back here to gather more people to look for a person who may know more about this madman.”

“Silly, you should have told us sooner!” Madam Jiang berated him.

Sect Leader Jiang nodded. “Take as many people you need, A Mian. Where is Changze, by the way? Why isn’t he with you?”

Jiang Fengmian paused. “Ah...” he muttered. He knew his parents had assigned Wei Changze to be with him, but Jiang Fengmian did not like that. He loved Wei Changze’s company of course, Changze was fun to be with, but his best friend also deserved his own freedom.

“Young Master Jiang, should we also help you in your search?” Yu Zihua suddenly offered.

Jiang Fengmian was a little stunned. “What? But Maiden Yu, you have an important meeting to attend. We don’t know when the search will end, you don’t have to.”

“The madman attacked us and injured several of my shimei. This has also become part of our business now,” Yu Zihua said.

“But Shijie, your meeting with Madam Jin...” the younger disciples of Meishan Yu were all worried. Missing an appointment with the matriarch of Lanling Jin would be disrespectful. Not to mention Lanling Jin was one of the five major sects and Jin Guangshan was the sect heir, offending them would not be good for their image.

“Ziyuan, why don’t you go with Young Master Jiang?” Yu Zihua suggested.

“But Zihua!”

Jiang Fengmian’s eyes fell on the disciple sitting next to Yu Zihua. She was beautiful, with smooth fair skin, delicate features, and striking violet eyes. He noticed a silver ring with bright purple crystal on her finger, that seemed to be quite a powerful spiritual item.

“Ziyuan, you’re the most capable of us. I’ll be fine with the rest of our sisters. Capturing a mass murderer is more important,” Yu Zihua said. She turned to Jiang Fengmian. “Young Master Jiang, if I may ask, would you have my martial sister, Yu Ziyuan assist you?”

It was already dark by the time they reached Qishan. Normally anyone going back to their hometown would just return home - as the term implied - but not one who was escaping an arranged marriage, and one whose father was possibly planning to drag him to a wedding he didn’t want with a woman he never met. Hence, instead of heading back to Nightless City as he should have done months ago, Wen Ruohan now laid in bed, sleeping next to Lan Qiren.

Lan Qiren stared at the ceiling. He was certain he had booked three rooms the night before. They could have gone to a bigger inn with more rooms, but large businesses were partly, if not mostly owned by members of Wen Clan who would recognize their young master. Cangse Sanren took one room, Lan Qiren dragged Wei Changze to room with him so he did not have to be in the same room as Wen Ruohan, while the latter was roomed with A Zhao.

So how did they end up like this? Lan Qiren glanced to the other side of the room and his eyes twitched when he saw that Wei Changze’s bed was unoccupied. Wei Changze wasn’t a notorious night owl like Wei Wuxian and was the type to wake up early, but not as early as five of course. That meant he had switched places with Wen Ruohan last night after Lan Qiren had gone to bed. And this shameless man once again chose to climb into his bed instead of using the perfectly available bed.

He removed the arm on his waist and got off the bed to wash up and perform his morning meditation.

The sun was soon rising and Wen Ruohan finally woke up. He lazily walked up to Lan Qiren and draped himself over Lan Qiren’s back. “Good morning, RenRen. You’re up early again.”

Lan Qiren removed the arms from his shoulders. “How did you get in? What about Young Master Wei?”

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “Young Master Wei said he is extremely tired and plans to sleep in but since he is a light sleeper and you are an early riser, it would not be ideal to share a room with you.”

That liar. Wei Changze was never late to lessons, he was an early bird himself since he originally started as a servant and all servants often woke up early to do their chores. What more was he planning to do to get them together? What did Lan Qiren have to do to get the absolute mad lad to stop his crazy ideas? What scared Lan Qiren the most was how he was now getting used to Wen Ruohan being this close to him, breathing right behind his neck.

The last time Wei Changze had planted an idea inside his head, Lan Qiren had drunkenly made out with Wen Ruohan. No, he was not going to fall for his trick again. The next time if they ever had to stay in an inn again, he was putting his foot down and getting his very own personal room.

“Where are we heading from here?” Lan Qiren asked.

Wen Ruohan settled behind him, head leaned against his back as he yawned and Lan Qiren continued fighting against the wandering hands. “After you went to bed last night, Maiden Liang and I stayed downstairs there for a little drink and gossip. Seems like there was another attack by the madman around here, but the victims all survived with minor injuries this time.”

Lan Qiren was a surprised. Usually in all the attacks there would be at least one serious casualty. “How?”

Wen Ruohan raised his hand and lifted two fingers. “One, the group consisted of all young females. Two, they were top disciples from Meishan Yu.”

“Ah,” Lan Qiren understood now. If their assumptions were correct, the madman had likely left after realizing that the people he had attacked were all females, which was unsuitable to be his new vessel. So far in all cases, all of the victims were either adult males, or were together with one. Most women would not live or travel by themselves unless they were powerful cultivators and martial artists like the disciples of Meishan Yu.

“It happened very recently, so the madman should still be in the area. He can’t move that fast constantly anymore, not with his body deteriorating,” Wen Ruohan said.

“Then get off me and get ready,” Lan Qiren said, pushing away the pig hands that were trying to touch his waist.

“You were so eager to claim me the other day RenRen, how can you push me-”

“I remember nothing!” Lan Qiren yelled, scurrying away from Wen Ruohan, who only laughed at his flustered reaction.

Breakfast was a quick affair, since they had to catch up with Qingheng Jun as quickly as they could. Wen Ruohan had changed into different clothes - still sporting the Qishan Wen red, but without the patterns and emblems. They had no idea what Sect Leader Wen was planning, and wandering in his hometown while wearing the Qishan Wen robes might be a terrible idea, especially when he was out doing investigations without his father’s knowledge and permission.

They split up and went around the marketplace first, questioning the people who had witnessed or heard of the incident as well as inquiring if they had seen Qingheng Jun. They were in a region where a major cultivation sect resided, hence most of the people were able to recognize a Gusu Lan cultivator, especially one as famous as Qingheng Jun. Unfortunately it also made hiding Wen Ruohan a little difficult.

They met up again after a couple hours at the back of a street. Cangse Sanren hummed. "... Should you stay back?"

"And let me get eaten by my father? How mean, I thought we were drinking buddies, Maiden Liang," Wen Ruohan said dryly.

"They were all looking at you," Wei Changze said.

"Because I'm too handsome, thank you," Wen Ruohan said nonchalantly. "Either way it is a matter of time before my father hears about it. Let's settle this and leave this place as fast as we can, how about that?"

"If you say so," Cangse Sanren said and shrugged. "By the way, do you think Young Master Nie and Young Master Jiang have gathered the people to look for Zhao Wu already?"

"By this time, they should have done so," said Wei Changze. "Why don't we send a letter to set a place to meet up?"

Cangse Sanren, being the most unknown person among the five (A Zhao did not count, a child delivering a letter to be sent to a major sect was suspicious) went ahead to write a letter for each sect heir and find the people to send them. They then continued their journey to find Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing.

Either by coincidence or by fate, Wen Ruohan decided to pick a more obscure route yet Cangse Sanren spotted a familiar purple figure walking not far from them.

"Isn't that Young Master Jiang?"

Sure enough, the one she spotted turned out to be Jiang Fengmian, who came from a different direction but seemed to be heading to the same destination as they did. Lan Qiren however was more stunned to see Jiang Fengmian together with a young Yu Ziyuan. As far as he remembered, according to what he heard in his original timeline, Jiang Fengmian was not supposed to have met Yu Ziyuan yet at this time. Lan Qiren knew about this because he was the one who attended Jiang Fengmian's wedding, as Qingheng Jun was unable to leave Gusu after bringing Bai Yiqing there. He remembered Jiang Fengmian looking a little awkward and the elders saying it was only normal since he had never met his bride.

Their marriage was arranged by Meishan Yu Sect Leader - Yu Ziyuan's grandmother, who had good impressions of Yunmeng Jiang. It was said that Yunmeng Jiang had helped out Meishan Yu with an incident involving their disciples. Hence, after Jin Zixuan's mother was married off to Jin Guangshan, Meishan Yu sent a letter requesting for an arranged marriage between Jiang Fengmian and their top disciple at the time, Yu Ziyuan. That was how Jiang

Fengmian married the Violet Spider, and soon after that Wei Changze left the sect to join Cangse Sanren.

So why was Yu Ziyuan here with him?

“Changze! Everyone!” Jiang Fengmian greeted them, waving his arm as soon as he noticed the group coming over to him.

“Fengmian, you’re here too,” Wei Changze said. “Who is this lady?”

Jiang Fengmian smiled and slung his arm around Wei Changze. “Oh, I should introduce you. This is Maiden Yu Ziyuan from Meishan Yu. She will be joining us to help track the demonic cultivator.”

Wei Changze stiffened.

“Are you sure we should add more people to this?” Wen Ruohan said.

“Maiden Yu and her group were attacked by the demonic cultivators on their way to Lanling. It just so happened that the nearest sect they could find was Yunmeng Jiang and they had to stop by to recover a bit,” Jiang Fengmian explained.

Lan Qiren blinked as he put the pieces together. So this was the incident that became the starting point of Yunmeng Jiang and Meishan Yu’s good relationship. Except that in the original timeline, Jiang Fengmian likely never left Gusu and perhaps just spent the days off playing or night hunting with Nie Yizhou, Wei Changze, and Cangse Sanren. Meanwhile, Yu Ziyuan would continue escorting her martial sister to Lanling. That would explain the changes.

“Why is your face so stiff, Young Master Wei?” Wen Ruohan, who had noticed Wei Changze’s odd expression, teased him. “Have you fallen for Maiden Yu’s beauty, perhaps?”

Cangse Sanren flinched. She glanced at the female cultivator dressed in the prim and proper robes of Meishan Yu, with beautiful hairpins, silver earrings, and a large gem adorning her dainty fingers. She looked down at her own plain black and white robes, then thought of her hair, tied with nothing but a simple red ribbon. For some reason it made her feel a little sour.

Wei Changze shook his head. “How could I dare. I am merely a little surprised.”

“If my presence is unwelcomed, I can travel on my own or follow behind separately,” Yu Ziyuan said. As expected, even from a young age she was already confident and was not afraid to voice her opinion. Just like Yu Zihua, she was not the delicate and demure type of woman - exactly the type that Jin Guangshan disliked, since he could not control them.

“No such thing, Maiden Yu. Please make yourself comfortable with us,” said Wen Ruohan.

They continued their journey with the addition of one member, but Lan Qiren sensed something unusual. Sure, the entire trip alone was already a major change from his original timeline, but considering he had gotten used to Wen Ruohan pestering him and A Zhao holding his hand, there shouldn’t be anything bothering him anymore at this point. The

addition of Yu Ziyuan was unexpected but not unwelcome, the Violet Spider was as skilled as top disciples from major sects and Lan Qiren very much respected her as a cultivator, knowing that in his original time she had stood to defend her home until her last breath.

It wasn't until they stopped by a small stream to take a break, that Lan Qiren finally realized what was bothering him.

Cangse Sanren was not speaking.

Cangse Sanren being silent was the equivalent of Wei Wuxian sitting still. It was unnatural. Unless she was super sleepy or super tired, she would utilize her mouth to the maximum, just like her son. However, judging from her expression, she seemed to be a little uneasy, perhaps even upset.

"Changze, can you help refill the water while I start the fire?" Jiang Fengmian said, handing his water canister to Wei Changze.

"Of course," Wei Changze said.

Yu Ziyuan got up from the stone she was sitting on. "I need to refill water as well."

Cangse Sanren suddenly got up as well. "I'm going too!" She exclaimed and followed the two to the stream.

"... She's acting weird," Lan Qiren commented.

Wen Ruohan laughed and plopped next to the Gusu Lan young master. "RenRen, have you not seen a jealous woman in your life?"

Jealousy? Wei Changze had not an ounce of interest in Yu Ziyuan other than the fact that she was going to be the Lady of Jiang Clan soon. Cangse Sanren had no reason to be jealous of her, Wei Changze would only have his eyes on her. He was so besotted with her, he was even willing to leave his clan to be with her.

"It's ridiculous," Lan Qiren said.

"Why would it be ridiculous? I wouldn't like it if I see you express interest in other people," Wen Ruohan said.

"It's not like I'm interested in anyone else," Lan Qiren mumbled.

"...."

"... What?" Lan Qiren uttered, seeing Wen Ruohan's big grin.

The Qishan Wen heir laughed. "RenRen, you really say things that make my heart race all the time even without realizing it."

"... What did I say?"

“Think back about what you said, RenRen. I’m going to hold on to that forever,” Wen Ruohan chuckled.

“You-”

A sudden scream stopped them. It was followed by the sound of a loud crash.

Lan Qiren froze. Wei Changze, Yu Ziyuan, and Cangse Sanren rushed back from the stream. Jiang Fengmian stomped down on the fire he had just ignited to extinguish it. They rushed towards the source of the loud scream - a long path used by travellers from Qishan to go to Yueyang. Judging from the scream and the loud crash, it could not be a small incident.

When they arrived at the location, they could see an ox cart - or at least what was supposed to be an ox cart. It had been wrecked to pieces, the wood broken to pieces and the loads - a stack of hay and carts of vegetables - were all over the ground, smashed to pieces. The most devastating part, however, was the body laying on the ground, soaked in a pool of blood. A young lady wailed beside the lifeless body, her own body caked with fresh blood and mud.

The cultivators immediately rushed towards her and Lan Qiren did not forget to cover A Zhao’s eyes. A child should not be exposed to such a gruesome image, even if he knew A Zhao had witnessed it before.

“What happened? Are you injured?” Jiang Fengmian quickly asked.

The lady sobbed and shook her head. “Someone suddenly came....blocked our cart...then attacked my husband...”

Wen Ruohan knelt by the man’s side and checked his pulse. He shook his head. The man was gone and beyond saving. The woman screamed in anguish even louder.

Lan Qiren’s eyes noticed the trail of blood. That must be where the madman was heading to. The man and his wife had just been attacked, so the madman ought to still be close. He looked at Wei Changze. “We’re going to chase the guy.”

Wei Changze nodded. “I’ll go fly back to the nearest town and look for someone to help the lady. Maiden Liang, please stay with her.”

Cangse Sanren nodded. A Zhao stayed behind with her as well, since a child following them while they were about to face the demonic cultivator might be dangerous.

The cultivators flew straight along the path, following the trail of blood left behind. Sure enough, within an incense stick, the trail of blood was thinning but the malicious aura was thickening. The madman had been in the horrendous state for too long, murdering so many people, staining himself with the blood of the innocents, who of course would resent and haunt him. As if the strong resentful energy wasn’t enough, the foul stench of the rotting vessel also gave it away easily.

Lan Qiren swallowed hard. Even though he and Wen Ruohan had been chasing after this figure for a long time, it was their first time actually facing it. Qingheng Jun’s description of

the man could not even suffice to describe how horrible he appeared. Indeed, the face was no longer recognizable. Blood was dripping from his orifices, his cheeks were sunken, maggots were crawling out, and just the smell was enough to make him want to vomit.

Wen Ruohan initiated the first attack - sending a wave of spiritual energy towards the madman. The blast of energy however seemed to do nothing, as a wall of resentful energy deflected the attack. He clicked his tongue. "How is this possible?"

"Maybe spiritual attacks won't work," Jiang Fengmian said and lunged towards the madman with his sword unsheathed.

Yu Ziyuan followed suit with her sword as well. However, despite the seemingly rotting muscles the madman was able to move with precision, avoiding their attacks and swinging his own rusty, crimson-coated sword back in retaliation. Lan Qiren flashed out a binding talisman and hurled it towards the madman to restrain him. Yet, the slip of paper was torn to pieces before it even reached him.

He paled. With this much resentful energy, it was only a matter of time before this man would turn into a demon. The madman, who may have retained enough consciousness or instinct to know that he was being overpowered with four strong cultivators surrounding him from all directions, leaped away to flee. Lan Qiren took out his guqin and quickly strummed a series of notes to stop him.

To his surprise, his attack was reflected back and he was nearly thrown away. A burst of resentful energy exploded and the madman screamed, more blood splattering out from his mouth. The vessel containing him was almost at its limit.

"Are you okay, RenRen?" Wen Ruohan asked, blocking the force with his sword.

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth. "I'm fine. More importantly, we have to find a way to stop that thing!"

"As long as we can destroy the vessel and seal the energy..." Wen Ruohan paused. He glanced at Lan Qiren. "RenRen, didn't Xue Chonghai use the Yin Iron to accumulate resentful energy? What if I use the piece I have to-"

Lan Qiren gripped on his arm. "You will not do that!"

"But as long as he has that crazy amount of energy shielding him, we can't inflict substantial damage. At least not without tiring ourselves," said Wen Ruohan.

"We have four people here!"

"And look at those two!" Wen Ruohan said, pointing at Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan who were still attacking the madman relentlessly. "None of their attacks are working! Also, what if he possesses one of us upon losing his current vessel? We need to find a way to contain the thing inside first!"

Truth of the past

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your kind, motivating words! I still suck, but I feel energized now

☆★:∞.o(≧▽≦)o.∞:★★

the battle continues!

Qingheng Jun, Bai Yiqing, and Lan Fan had appeared to join the fight. Bai Yiqing unsheathed her sword and lunged towards the madman without hesitation, joined by Qingheng Jun who also wielded his blade against the madman. Lan Fan took out a couple of talismans and sent it the madman's way. To Lan Qiren's surprise, the talismans used by Lan Fan seemed to have some effect this time.

They were able to cut through the walls of resentful energy, allowing Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing to advance in a storm of relentless attacks. Lan Qiren got up and rushed towards Lan Fan. "Uncle."

Lan Fan glanced briefly at him. "Qiren. Do you know what you're facing?"

"A living corpse is the only thing I can describe it as. Whatever inhabiting the body and controlling has the ability to jump from one body to another," Lan Qiren said.

"How do you know?"

"Maiden Bai has been chasing the man for months and according to her, he would switch vessels once the old one is no longer usable. We have been investigating the origin of the madman," said Lan Qiren.

Lan Fan frowned. "And have you found him?"

"There are two candidates and I'm not quite sure which one is actually in control," Lan Qiren admitted. "Uncle, have you found a way to suppress the madman?"

Lan Fan nodded. "To do this, first we need to weaken the vessel."

"Then?"

"The spirit inside will be forced to go out and possess the nearest body to survive. Before it can do that, I will seal it inside me."

Lan Qiren's jaw dropped. Seal it inside himself? What did he mean? "Uncle, you're going to let yourself get possessed?"

“Correction, I am sealing the spirit within my body temporarily and suppressing him with my own energy,” said Lan Fan. “After that, I will return to Gusu and undergo cleansing every single day for one hundred days to weaken the spirit and eventually seal it in a different vessel.”

“But that’s dangerous! Can’t you seal it directly in a spirit-trapping pouch?”

Lan Fan shook his head. “A spirit with this much resentful energy cannot be kept in a mere spirit-trapping pouch. Moreover, this particular spirit is able to force itself into an already occupied vessel on its own. There needs to be something sentient to suppress it.”

Meaning, another spirit. Wei Wuxian would use existing resentful spirits and manipulate them into suppressing the madman. However, nobody but Wei Wuxian had such ability. The only option left would be to use a living person and knowing Lan Fan, he would not use another person for such a risky technique.

“Uncle... remember the spirit we caught at Huanying Village? Can’t we use that?” Lan Qiren asked.

He received an astonished look from his uncle. Lan Fan furrowed his brows. “Qiren, you must not resort to such a diabolical path,” he warned sternly.

“But-”

“This technique is risky, but I am prepared for the risk. The souls of the ones killed in Huanying Village do not have the option to refuse or to consent. You must not force them. When you fight evil with more evil, it will not necessarily eliminate them. The clash of evils can cause it to spread even more, how do you plan to control that?” Lan Fan questioned.

He did not have the answer to that.

In fact he already knew why he shouldn’t have even considered that. Did he not ask Wei Wuxian the same thing? How in the world was he going to stop the resentful energy once it went out of control?

Lan Fan’s face softened a little and he patted his nephew’s shoulder. “I understand you are concerned about me, Qiren. It makes me happy that the nephew I’ve raised cares so much for me.”

“Uncle...”

“However, this uncle of yours is old. It will only be an honor to me, if I can use my life to contribute to the peace and safety of the people,” said Lan Fan. He produced more talismans from his sleeves to restrain the malicious aura. “Now move away, Qiren. Continue playing the guqin, it may look like it doesn’t work but it will in fact weaken the resentful energy built around him.”

Lan Qiren wasn’t completely convinced, but he obliged and brought out his guqin once more. With Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing joining the fight, the attacks had finally proven to be

effective. Wen Ruohan, seeing that Lan Qiren was fine and continuing the attack, also returned to the offensive side and swung his sword against the madman once more.

Qingheng Jun laced his blade with spiritual energy and a purifying spell. He lunged towards the target and eyed the spot where he could sense was already cracking. With one thrust of his sword, the blade went through the madman's heart and the walls formed from resentment were broken. Bai Yiqing lopped off the right arm, while Wen Ruohan took the left.

The madman howled. His screams were deafening and Lan Qiren experienced a sensation not too dissimilar from the impact he felt at the temple of massacred men or Nie Mingjue's left arm. It was painful and any closer to the source or any minute longer he would have puked out blood. Lan Qiren grimaced when the body began disintegrating. Blood poured out from the madman's mouth and his eyes were wide open, that one of them seemed to be popping out from the socket.

The sight was truly frightening.

A wisp of dark energy emerged from the man's head, circling around the body once more before wildly rotating, as if searching for a vessel to possess. Lan Fan took out a slip of paper, sliced the tip of his finger, and completed the last character on the talisman with his own blood. He plastered the paper against his own belly and the dark energy that had been wildly moving with no specific aim then lunged towards Lan Fan and dove straight into his belly through the talisman.

Lan Fan proceeded to quickly chant a sutra and performed a series of hand signs to complete the sealing ceremony. The body of the previous vessel disintegrated completely and Qingheng Jun sealed the rest of the lingering malicious energy with a spirit-trapping pouch.

Lan Qiren slumped down. It was gone.

They sealed the madman. He was gone. Lan Fan was alive. The mystery had yet to be completely solved but with this, they were finally able to stop the madman from killing more people. Now that they had captured the soul, they might even be able to perform Inquiry if they were lucky after this. Lan Qiren took a deep breath.

Yu Ziyuan exhaled. "Is that it?"

Jiang Fengmian sheathed his sword back. "It seems to be. Elder Lan, are you okay?"

Lan Fan coughed and placed his palm against his chest. "My body feels heavy but that is just the side effect of the forced sealing, plus the burden of suppressing the spirit inside my body. I will be fine once we reach Cloud Recess. Help me up and carry me back."

"Of course, Uncle," said Qingheng Jun as he hoisted Lan Fan up and helped him walk. He glanced behind. "Qiren, the demonic cultivator has been captured now so you're returning to Cloud Recess, right?"

Lan Qiren stiffened. He felt Wen Ruohan's gaze fell on him.

“Or do you still have something to do?”

A Zhao needed a new home, right. He still hadn't found a way to completely seal the Yin Iron, wasn't that his original goal? To ensure Wen Ruohan would not use the relic? Then there was the matter with Zhao Wu, and the notes left behind by the two runaway men. He couldn't leave Wen Ruohan just like that. Who knew what kind of trouble this man would cause? Lan Qiren needed to keep an eye on him.

He took a deep breath. “I can't return yet.”

Qingheng Jun stared at him. He sighed, then a small smile curved up on his face. “I see.”

Lan Qiren nodded.

“Well, I won't stop you. Just make sure to visit home. Don't elope, brother will prepare the ceremony for you.”

Lan Qiren spluttered. Wen Ruohan only burst out laughing at the side.

“Who... who's getting married?!” Lan Qiren uttered.

Jiang Fengmian blinked innocently. “Second Young Master Lan, didn't you say you were going to marry Young Master Wen once this is over?”

“When did I say that?!”

“That's what your son said,” Jiang Fengmian pointed.

Lan Fan raised his hand, his face looked pale. “Hold on... wait a second. Who's getting married and who's having a son?”

“Nobody!”

Wen Ruohan pouted. “RenRen, it's not good to break promises, especially after you've plucked the cabbage.”

“Pl...plucked...” Lan Fan was foaming in the mouth and he looked like he was about to faint.

“Alright, alright, it was a joke. We shouldn't tease your uncle when he's keeping an evil spirit inside,” Wen Ruohan said.

Qingheng Jun chuckled and carried Lan Fan on his back.

They decided to part ways. The mystery had yet to be solved.

Lan Qiren walked beside Wen Ruohan, when he suddenly remembered something. Right, what about Bai Yiqing? Where was she going after this? She must not leave, Lan Qiren would have to persuade his brother to woo her seriously so Xichen and Wangji would be born. He turned around. “Xiongzhang-”

-and saw Lan Fan raising an arm holding a blade, aimed to stab Qingheng Jun's neck.

He dropped his jaw.

“Xiongzhong!!!!”

It happened within a split second.

Qingheng Jun turned around, eyes widened as he saw his uncle with a hideous smile aiming to sever his throat. The blade inched closer towards him - before Bai Yiqing also noticed the sudden attack and automatically reacted by kicking Lan Fan away from Qingheng Jun.

Crimson liquid dripped from his eyes and ears.

The sealing did not work as expected. Lan Fan's body was too weak and old to contain it.

The madman, who was now possessing Lan Fan, lunged towards Qingheng Jun once more, aiming to strike his heart. The latter was taken aback by the shock that he was unable to move away.

That was when Bai Yiqing, in that moment of desperation and panic, unsheathed her sword once more and pierced the blade through Lan Fan's chest.

All the while, Lan Qiren watched with his breath held.

It was as if the world had stopped moving.

Lan Fan fell to the ground. Whereas the previous vessels were surrounded by resentful energy that fueled them and would keep moving, Lan Fan's body was still plastered with talismans to stop him from becoming a walking corpse. Qingheng Jun remained still while Bai Yiqing turned as pale as a ghost. Her hands trembled and she dropped her sword. “I... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to...”

‘Lan Fan’ parted his lips.

“.... *Shijie*....”

The voice that came out did not belong to the old man. It was a disembodied voice of a much younger male. Finally contained in a body and unable to leave anymore, it was as if clarity of the mind had finally returned to the person.

Bai Yiqing fell on her knees. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “No way... A Xue...? Impossible, you are... but you are that bastard, Chang Ran...”

The body coughed and spat out blood. Then, an elderly voice came out. “My nephews...”

Lan Qiren shakily walked towards his uncle and knelt beside the body lying on the ground, blood seeping out. “Uncle?”

Lan Fan blinked his eyes several times wearily. “Don’t... worry. I’ve set... countermeasures. I was prepared... for this to happen. The spirit... won’t escape. My body will continue...to contain and fight it, until it rots. Keep the talisman on my body.... never touch it. Once I die.... bury me as fast as you can.”

No. There had to be a way to save his uncle.

Zidian. Zidian was here, Yu Ziyuan was here. They could force the spirit out, and...

Where would it go? How would he control it? The Yin Iron? Should he really risk the lives of the entire cultivation world?

Lan Fan raised his quivering arm and cupped Lan Qiren’s face. “Qiren.... certain things are meant to happen. Uncle is happy... he protected all of you.”

“It’s... it’s not too late. Wei Changze is finding a healer for the woman. We can still save you,” Lan Qiren insisted.

Lan Fan nodded. “Perseverance. Hard work. Not giving up. Uncle... taught you well.”

Lan Qiren knelt by Lan Fan’s side. Wen Ruohan ran off, possibly to check if Wei Changze had brought back a healer for the woman they encountered earlier.

Certain things were unavoidable. Lan Qiren knew that. Even knowing the future, he was unable to interfere with fate. More than this, he was afraid of what was to come.

They flew back to Cloud Recess.

Lan Fan was still alive thanks to Wen Ruohan bringing back a healer for an emergency treatment but they all knew it was a matter of time before he succumbed to the stress and crossed the bridge to the other world. His core was terribly damaged from containing another soul inside him and with such grave injuries, there was no chance of recovery.

Bai Yiqing knelt in front of the Ancestral Hall, placed her sword on the ground, and prostrated. “I have committed a sin. I will accept any punishment.”

The elders were enraged, of course. The entire sect was. Lan Fan was the beloved elder, family of the deceased sect leader and the teacher who helped to raise Qingheng Jun and Lan Qiren after their parents’ death. He was also one of the main contributors to the vast library of Cloud Recess. He had taught generations of young disciples.

In his original timeline, there was no witness to the event. There were only the three of them there, meaning both Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing may be more worn out than they were. Qingheng Jun perhaps did not even notice that ‘Lan Fan’, possessed by the spirit, was trying to kill him. Even if he did, there was nobody else who could prove Bai Yiqing had stabbed

their uncle to save him. There was no healer who came in time to save Lan Fan and he died right then and there.

The elders locked her up for the moment while awaiting the judgement.

That evening, Lan Qiren went to the prison where Bai Yiqing was locked. He found Qingheng Jun already there, standing outside the prison door. She was sitting, her back leaned against the cold wall and her eyes lifeless. She noticed Lan Qiren's presence and trembled. "... young master."

Lan Qiren nodded awkwardly. Seeing this the second time and knowing the truth did not make him feel any better. He did not feel any hatred towards her. He had no idea how to feel, in fact.

"Second Young Master, please tell me... you investigated the case, didn't you?" She asked, her voice still quivering. "Tell me... is the one inside not Chang Ran?"

Lan Qiren swallowed hard and shook his head. "It wasn't. I went to perform Inquiry at the place where you and your group had gone to and... the spirit left there was Chang Ran. Therefore... the one possessing people can't be Chang Ran."

Tears pooled in Bai Yiqing's eyes. "Then... the one I killed, the one I've been chasing all this time..."

"Possibly Xue Yanzi. Your shidi."

She cupped her face and sobbed.

Lan Qiren now understood why Bai Yiqing was immediately punished with no further investigation, why she took the blame entirely and why she never complained about being locked down in that house. Back then Lan Fan's dead body had to be immediately buried and not disturbed to prevent the malicious spirit from escaping.

Bai Yiqing was punishing herself. Even if Qingheng Jun tried to prove her innocence, she still would never forgive herself. She had stabbed a stranger, along with her shidi.

Nobody had investigated that temple thoroughly before. All this time, perhaps Bai Yiqing thought Chang Ran had murdered her master and martial brother after stealing her master's technique, not knowing that Chang Ran's body had actually been forcibly stolen. She may have only witnessed 'Chang Ran' going amok and killing everyone, thus bore so much hatred for him. When she discovered that her shidi was the one responsible for all the murders and now she had been the one to end him, her mind could not accept it.

"Maiden Bai," Qingheng Jun said. "I will tell the truth to the elders. You will not be punished."

"I killed him," she uttered.

"You did not-"

"I killed him," she repeated. "Please let me receive the punishment. So long as I live with this guilt, I can never be at peace."

"Injuring an elder with no reason is punishable with a discipline whip and the sect won't be merciful to an outsider. You may die or end up crippled for life," Qingheng Jun said.

Back then, Wangji had received thirty-three lashes for injuring thirty-three elders. Even with his high cultivation he ended up bedridden for three years and the scars were permanent. If Lan Fan were to die before Bai Yiqing's judgement was decided, she would be punished for 'murder' instead of 'causing injuries'. She would not get away with a single lash.

"I don't care," she cried. "I wronged him. I wronged them. I kept a blind eye to everything. I should have warned Shifu and A Xue that the new cultivation method was dangerous. I persuaded Chang Ran to stay for our benefits even though he wanted to leave, even though he strongly disagreed with their ways. I made my own biased assumptions against Chang Ran and foolishly believed my shifu and shidi are innocent victims of his greed. I'm despicable."

"Maiden Bai..."

"I'm his shijie but I failed him. I stopped him only when it's already too late."

"Bai Yiqing!" Qingheng Jun raised his voice. He gripped on the iron rods separating them tightly. "Marry me."

Bai Yiqing stared at him in disbelief.

"Marry me. I will protect you."

Lan Qiren's eyes twitched at the declaration. *Xiongzhong, isn't that too straightforward? How is this any different from Wangji's lines, 'come back with me to Gusu'? Aren't you going to preface it with something or talk to her properly?*

Lan Qiren sighed. He looked at her. "Maiden Bai, what happened isn't your fault."

Her lips trembled. "But..."

"Whether it's Xue Yanzi, your shifu, or even my uncle... none of it is your fault. They are all adults who made their own decisions. They are responsible for the consequences," said Lan Qiren.

Wei Wuxian losing control and causing the deaths of people was not Jiang Yanli's responsibility. It wasn't Jiang Wanyin's responsibility. It was his own mistake and he paid the price with his own life. He owned up to his wrongdoings. At the same time, he was also not to be blamed for Jiang Yanli's death. She walked into the battlefield herself and took the attack to protect her brother.

"Uncle was ready for this. He knew he could die, which is why he came prepared with the countermeasures. From the beginning the plan is already flawed. Uncle knows that," Lan Qiren said.

Honestly, it was still hard. Just because in his memories Lan Fan had died once, didn't mean it would be easier the second time. In fact it was even harder because Lan Qiren knew there was a way to save him, if only he had the capability to do so. If only...

If only they could abandon the rules to save the living. Yet, it would be disregarding the dead ones, who couldn't speak. Either way would not make everyone happy. Lan Fan would not accept it.

Even with Bai Yiqing's interference, Master Zhao might still continue his research. Nothing would change. However, with Bai Yiqing's current mental state, revealing the notes and Master Zhao's true ambition would only damage her more.

He left the prison and returned to his room, deciding to not interfere anymore.

He felt horrible for not pointing out to Qingheng Jun of how wrong it felt, to tie Bai Yiqing to him in exchange of sparing her from punishment. They had witnesses now. Lan Qiren, Wen Ruohan, Jiang Fengmian, and Yu Ziyuan could all testify that she had attacked Lan Fan, who was possessed by the spirit, to protect Qingheng Jun. Eliminating evil was not against the rule. Protecting oneself was a valid reason that would spare her from any punishment.

She did not need to marry Qingheng Jun to gain protection this time.

However, if Bai Yiqing were to leave, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji would not be born and Lan Qiren loved them too much to let that happen.

Yet, wouldn't doing this meant letting her live a life of misery, married to a man she didn't love out of guilt?

He really had no idea what to do.

"RenRen."

Strong arms pulled him into a warm embrace.

"I'm sorry we couldn't do much."

Lan Qiren didn't have the energy to fight him and so simply leaned his head against the hard chest. He shut his eyes. "It's... fine."

"You're taking it well. You're a lot calmer than I thought you'd be. You're so strong, RenRen. I really admire you," Wen Ruohan whispered.

Lan Qiren sighed. "I'm not. I'm despicable."

"Why would you say that?"

"Maiden Bai should be freed. We all know she didn't mean to harm him. Yet, I'm not doing anything to set her free because... I know my brother loves her," he murmured.

"RenRen..." Wen Ruohan sighed and rubbed his head. "RenRen, there's nothing I can really say. We don't know how they feel about each other. Feelings can be nurtured."

"But not through guilt."

"If all that Bai Yiqing has is guilt, she will just continue to punish herself. If there's even a tad of feelings... I'm sure she will accept him. Be patient. I'll be leaving you for now, okay?"

Lan Qiren froze. He clutched on Wen Ruohan's robes and his eyes grew large. "What do you mean?"

"The investigation has to go on. An elder is grievously injured and the chance of survival is close to none. Maiden Bai will be on a trial and you have plenty to do. You are needed here. I will have to trouble you to look after A Zhao here, okay?"

"You're leaving?" *Without me?*

Wen Ruohan nodded. "There's still so much unknown. Zhao Wu is still out there. He may have the Yin Iron with him. I need to find him."

He turned to walk away, but Lan Qiren suddenly grabbed onto his clothes.

"Please don't go."

Wen Ruohan retracted his steps and faced the younger male once again.

"Please....don't leave me."

Their eyes met and they remained silent for a long moment. Warm breaths mingled. Lan Qiren closed his eyes as Wen Ruohan pulled him in for a long, tender kiss.

Behind the villains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Good morning, Second Young Master Lan.”

Lan Qiren stared at the ceiling emptily. Suddenly the white ceiling of his room seemed so unfamiliar now. There was something missing. The warmth of another person who liked to cling to him annoyingly. Lan Qiren could not remember since when he had gotten used to waking up with someone by his side, even though he had always been alone before.

He looked to the side and saw Wei Changze smiling softly at him as he carried a pot of tea.

“The encounter with resentful energy added with exhaustion got you collapsed with a high fever. Seems like you’re a lot better now,” Wei Changze said and poured a cup for him.

“... Where is he?” Lan Qiren asked. His throat felt parched.

Wei Changze paused. “Who?”

“Wen Ruohan.”

“He stayed here with you all night and went out this morning, saying he has something to do.”

Wen Ruohan left. Lan Qiren could not stop him. The Qishan Wen heir was gone, leaving him alone in his room with only a small note promising to come back.

He felt like a failure now. Nothing had changed. Sure, he finally discovered the mystery behind Lan Fan’s death in the original timeline but other than that? Wen Ruohan came back with him to Cloud Recess only for half a day before he walked away. Once he returned to Qishan, there may be no hope for him to approach Wen Ruohan once more. He would get married, have children, and Lan Qiren would just have to watch that.

“I’m so useless.”

Wei Changze frowned. “No, why would you say that?”

“I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t change anything,” he murmured.

Wei Changze shook his head. “Nothing is set in stones yet. In fact, don’t you think you’ve accomplished more than the past?”

“Exactly what did I accomplish?”

“Discovering the truth is also an accomplishment.”

“My uncle is still dying. Maiden Bai will still be tied to my brother and live a life of misery. Worst of all, I knew she is not to be blamed but I’m still letting it happen out of selfishness, to see my nephews again,” Lan Qiren seethed.

He hated himself. He hated that he had once let an innocent woman trapped in that house and he hated that even knowing the truth now, he might still do the same. How could he pride himself in being a member of Gusu Lan, when he could not even uphold justice for something that was clearly wrong?

“Elder Lan Fan is still alive. Maiden Bai’s punishment is not decided yet. Don’t give up when it’s just the beginning,” Wei Changze said.

“You said that, but what should I do?” Lan Qiren uttered.

Wei Changze crossed his arms and tapped his fingers. “Go and look for him.”

Lan Qiren scowled. “How?” Wen Ruohan did not even state where he was heading to. Zhao Wu could be anywhere.

“There must be a place he would go,” Wei Changze said. “The two of you have been travelling for a long time. You are tired and weary from the long journey and the battle against the demonic cultivator. Wen Ruohan too, will find a place where he can rest.”

Lan Qiren hummed as a place immediately popped into his mind. Wen Ruoyu. Dafan Mountain indeed would be the perfect place for Wen Ruohan to go. Wen Ruoyu was a cousin he trusted and a healer as well. He would go to Wen Ruoyu not only to recuperate but also to update his cousin on what had happened to Wen Lin at Hudie Village and the temple of the butterfly goddess.

He clenched his fists.

Should he really not do anything, when he knew there was something he could change?

Lan Qiren got up and fixed his appearance. “I will go and see my uncle first.”

Wei Changze almost jumped when he nearly collided against Cangse Sanren. He sighed and looked at her. “What are you doing, waiting outside Second Young Master Lan’s room like this? It is inappropriate, you know?”

Cangse Sanren tried to peek over his shoulder. “How is his fever?”

“He’s up and well now. The stress left him drained but he will be fine. He has a good cultivation level,” said Wei Changze.

Cangse Sanren pouted. “We should have stopped Young Master Wen from leaving this morning.”

Wei Changze flicked her forehead. “You were sleeping like a log. Don’t speak like you could have done something when you can barely wake up in time.”

Cangse Sanren blushed and rubbed her forehead. “Well, A Ze, you’re the early riser and should have done something.”

Wei Changze sighed. What could he have done? Wen Ruohan seemed determined to investigate this case to the end. After all, it involved his dead brother and a relic that could possibly cause great chaos in the future. If even Lan Qiren could not stop him from leaving, there was no way for Wei Changze to make him stay.

Though, nobody said it was too late to make him return to them.

They bumped into Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan on their way to the guest disciples’ quarter. It seemed like Yu Ziyuan was getting ready to leave. “Are you going back, Maiden Yu?” He asked.

Yu Ziyuan nodded. “The madman is dead. I have nothing else to contribute here.”

“He is dead, but the entire thing hasn’t actually been solved yet. There is still someone out there with the knowledge of the forbidden art,” Wei Changze said.

Yu Ziyuan crossed her arms. “Your point?”

“We aren’t planning to stop here. We are going to find the man who used to stay with the demonic cultivator. Maiden Yu, you are strong and wise, I think you would be able to help us with the search,” Wei Changze said.

According to Lan Qiren, Yu Ziyuan’s weapon, Zidian had the ability to tell if someone was possessed. If so, there might be a day when they would need her. He could not let her go to Lanling or return to Meishan yet. Not until Zhao Wu was found and... well, not until the ship sailed, he supposed.

“Changze, aren’t you asking too much from Maiden Yu?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

Yu Ziyuan raised an eyebrow at Jiang Fengmian. “Are you looking down at my skills?”

Jiang Fengmian quickly shook his head. “Not at all, Maiden Yu. However, you seem so fond of Maiden Yu Zihua. The matchmaking meeting is important to her, I thought you wanted to be by her side as soon as possible.”

“Hmph,” Yu Ziyuan narrowed her eyes. “Even if I’m not there, Zihua will be fine. Shouldn’t solving the plight of people take more priority than personal matters?”

“Maiden Yu is a respectable cultivator. However, your feelings should also matter,” Jiang Fengmian said.

Yu Ziyuan did not say a word. It seemed like she was not planning to leave. *Good*, Wei Changze thought with a smile.

Unknown to him, Cangse Sanren had been fuming at the side. She clicked her tongue. “I think we have more than enough people. We don’t need someone who knows nothing about this case, don’t you agree?”

There was a momentary silence. Wei Changze blinked and looked at her. “What are you saying?”

Cangse Sanren puffed up her cheeks. “I said what I said. If Maiden Yu doesn’t want to be here, why push her to stay, A Ze? It’s not like we can’t survive without her.”

Yu Ziyuan’s eyes twitched. “Oh? Are you trying to say something about me, Maiden Liang?”

“Just because you hail from a famous sect, doesn’t mean you’re any good.”

“That is a challenge, isn’t it?” Yu Ziyuan glared at Cangse Sanren.

Wei Changze was dumbfounded. Cangse Sanren was always friendly, even to strangers. What ticked her off? Did Yu Ziyuan do something to offend her? “Maiden Liang, stop. We shouldn’t be fighting.”

Cangse Sanren only looked even more annoyed. “What? You don’t want her to get hurt? Well sorry but I’m not afraid of a broken nail or a puny scar! I’ll wear them like a trophy!”

Yu Ziyuan unsheathed her sword. “Oh, you’re asking for it. Move away, I’m going to put this arrogant girl in her place.”

“That’s fine by me,” Cangse Sanren hissed and took out her own sword. “As long as you don’t go back crying to your sect when you lose.”

The two young men watched the two ladies growling at each other like two tigers fighting for their territories with absolute confusion. They had been pretty... civil throughout the past couple of days that they had known each other. Cangse Sanren especially was never this hostile and Yu Ziyuan as far as they remembered had not done anything to offend her.

However, just when the two of them were about to lunge at each other, a stern voice interrupted them. “Just what in the world are you two planning?”

Lan Qiren, who was done getting dressed and had just emerged from his room looked at them angrily. “Fighting is prohibited in Cloud Recesses. Copy the rules ten times and reflect!”

Unlike in his original timeline where Qingheng Jun only brought back Lan Fan’s lifeless body and a distraught Bai Yiqing, this time Lan Fan was still breathing, although his

condition was still deteriorating. The Lan Elders had put up talismans all over the room and a disciple would come every hour to play Cleansing, while healers would attend to him every three hours to supply spiritual energy.

Lan Qiren sat by his uncle's bed and held his hand. It was cold and if he didn't know any better he would have thought that Lan Fan's heart had stopped beating. "Uncle."

Lan Fan slowly opened his eyes. "Qiren."

His voice sounded so hoarse, so weak, like even breathing was too difficult to him. Lan Qiren pursed his lips and held his hands tight. "Uncle. I couldn't do anything."

Lan Fan shut his eyes. "Some things... are fated."

"But Uncle... are we not allowed to defy fate?" Lan Qiren questioned weakly. "If people aren't allowed to go against nature, why do we have medicine? Why do we teach martial arts to defend? Why do we cultivate? Is immortality or slowing the passage of time not something that is against the nature of humans?"

Lan Fan shook his head. "We try... but there will come a point... when defying fate only harms us. There are reasons... our ancestors made... the rules..."

"The rules are killing you now, Uncle," Lan Qiren said.

"The rules did not... it is... unavoidable. Qiren... actions have consequences. That's it. It's not... about the rules. This world... is not black or white," Lan Fan said.

Lan Qiren was stunned.

"Qiren... while sealing the one inside me... I had a glimpse. Would you listen... to this old man?"

It was already late, near midnight. A single candle dimly lit the small, modestly furnished room.

"Shifu, are you still trying to work on the technique?" Xue Yanzi asked.

Master Zhao took another bite of the cold piece of roasted chicken before grabbing his brush. He frowned a little. "Shit, your shijie is going to nag at me for making the brush oily again. Tell the brat Chang Ran to give us more brushes!"

Xue Yanzi sighed. "That's because you just casually took in more children, Shifu. They need those extra brushes to learn."

“Haa? Why is it my fault? Don’t waste ink and papers on brats who still pooped in their pants! Tell Qing-er to make them write on the sand with sticks ah! That’s how this master learned to write! Tsk, brats these days are spoiled,” Master Zhao huffed.

Xue Yanzi sat down next to his master and glanced at the papers strewn across the desk messily. Bai Yiqing would give them another long lecture once she saw the mess. She was already busy looking after the younger children. Chang Ran was still occupied with his business, making money for them to keep living comfortably. “Young Master Chang hates this idea.”

Master Zhao frowned at Xue Yanzi. “This is all to save you. How can I sit still when your life is in danger?”

“With proper cultivation, I can still extend my life for several more years. Shifu, it wasn’t your fault that I was poisoned. You don’t need to-”

“Of course it’s my fault!” Master Zhao suddenly shouted and slammed the desk. “I was careless. I let you get poisoned and tried to cure you myself, thinking I could do better than a proper healer. It was my fucking arrogance, my mistake, that ruined you. You had the potential, the talent, and I ruined it.”

Xue Yanzi looked down. He clenched his fists. “Is it worth it, at the price of innocent children?”

Master Zhao looked away. “Those children would have been starving to death on the streets anyway. Once you get better, you can do whatever you want, saving children and shits-”

“How can you say that?” Xue Yanzi looked at him, lips trembling. “Do you think I will be happy to kill someone for the sake of living?”

“We killed robbers and ruffians to survive, what is the difference? They are also living humans,” Master Zhao said.

“Those children are innocent,” Xue Yanzi argued.

“Some of those ruffians too, are just desperate. You are also a living human, why should I not do something to save you?” Master Zhao said. “I promised your mother I was going to find you, and take care of you. I’m not going to fuck it up. The lives of strangers are no more important to me than yours.”

“... I still disagree with your method,” Xue Yanzi said.

Master Zhao rolled his eyes. “You’re going to thank me once you get a healthy, new body, with an even more superior cultivation method. Nothing can stop you from rising to the top anymore. Those pompous sect masters won’t be able to reject you.”

He did not want to join a cultivation sect. He wanted to build his own sect, with his master and senior sister.

“I’m going to enter seclusion. Don’t make any trouble,” Master Zhao said.

For the following days Xue Yanzi went about his daily life and regular chores as usual. Yet, his heart was unable to be at peace. How could he bear to live by stealing someone else's body? He stared at the notes long and hard.

"A Xue, are you still studying that?" Bai Yiqing tapped his shoulder. "You said it yourself, it's going to be dangerous. Manipulating golden cores can leave you crippled if you do it wrong."

"Not if I have the right body," Xue Yanzi said. Which Master Zhao was planning to give him. He wished he could tell Bai Yiqing the truth, that the reason Master Zhao was doing all this research originally stemmed from him.

Yet, he couldn't tell her. If he did, he would have to reveal how and why he was poisoned. Moreover, he did not want to ruin the illusions of a respectable cultivator and an admirable figure that Bai Yiqing had of their master. For the sake of keeping their small group together, he had been pretending as if Master Zhao was doing the right thing, without ever revealing the truth and their master's real intention of adopting as many children with good potential.

He felt sick.

The more days he spent with the children, the more he was plagued with remorse for something that had yet to occur, but would happen eventually.

He could not bear this anymore.

Nearing the final days of Master Zhao's seclusion, he went to the cave where Master Zhao had been meditating. He had sealed himself in with a complicated array to prevent intruders coming in and harming him while he was in a state of deep concentration. Xue Yanzi however was already familiar with the array and easily broke through the barrier.

He was set on putting his foot down and rejecting the idea, no matter what. He would not argue about this anymore.

Little did he know, it would indeed be their last confrontation.

He found Master Zhao in a state of qi deviation. He was holding something in his hand, covered with dirt, perhaps dug out from the ground. Master Zhao let out a blood-curdling scream and attacked him.

It was a long fight and at some point everything became blurry to him. Before he knew it, his master was lying on the ground, blood seeping out from a hole in his stomach and the item caked with dirt was now in his hand. He trembled. Resentful energy lingered in the air and Xue Yanzi ran out. He encountered Chang Ran, who of course upon seeing his bloodied state, was alarmed.

Chang Ran saw the relic in his hands and his eyes narrowed. "Xue Yanzi, let go of that thing. It's malicious."

Xue Yanzi however was still shaken and unable to think clearly. He refused to accept that he had just killed his own master. In his mind, it was the strange thing in his hand that had killed Master Zhao. "Did you plan it? Did you plant this cursed relic inside to kill my Shifu?"

Chang Ran's jaw dropped. "You... you killed your master?"

"I didn't! I didn't! I didn't!!!" He screamed. "I didn't do anything... I didn't want to... I just wanted to stop him... it must be you..!"

"Xue Yanzi, you've gone mad! You killed your master and now you're accusing me? No matter how much I hate him, I would not kill him!" Chang Ran spat. "That thing is driving you to madness, let it go!"

"Noo!!"

Seeing that talking was futile, Chang Ran pounced at him and tried to take the relic from his hand forcefully.

Xue Yanzi could feel his consciousness slowly fading. The stress had exacerbated his condition, he was about to experience a qi deviation as well. His entire body felt like he was being boiled alive. Blood dripped from his orifices and he coughed, splattering crimson liquid over Chang Ran's chest.

He was dying.

Right before he could take his last breath, he could feel something inside him stirring.

He blacked out for a full ten seconds, before he opened his eyes to the sight of his own dead body. He could hear mixed screams from young children and Bai Yiqing, who were all running towards the scene.

Master Zhao, before his death, had forcefully imprinted the spell on his disciple.

Lan Qiren was silent throughout the entire time.

His hands were shaking. He could not believe it. To think that the deadly technique that had cost countless lives started as an attempt to save someone. Master Zhao was so obsessed with researching core manipulation and body possession not for himself, but for Xue Yanzi. Yet, his method had only caused suffering to Xue Yanzi himself, who was doomed to keep possessing other people until he could find the perfect compatible vessel and as a result, so many innocent people were killed or injured.

"Qiren... you must remember. Saving someone... must not come... at the cost of others..." Lan Fan uttered. He was wheezing slightly, breathing was getting even more difficult.

Lan Qiren looked down. He knew that, of course he knew that.

Back then, if Wei Wuxian had remained quiet and ignored the Wen remnants' plight, even if he could no longer be an esteemed cultivator due to his lack of golden core, he would still be living a fairly good life compared to the life he had at the Burial Mound. However, Wei Wuxian stuck to his own ideals. Nothing good happened - the Wen remnants still died. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli died. Wei Wuxian himself died. Lan Qiren thought he was a fool, but at the same time a small part of him also secretly envied his determination.

A small smile slowly formed on Lan Fan's face. "Though... it doesn't mean... you can't try."

He looked back at the older man.

"My life... is coming to an end, because of this. Yet... I've stopped this thing... from claiming for victims," Lan Fan said. "Qiren... what is justice, what is evil. Think of it. Nothing... is definite."

Lan Qiren bit his lower lip. "I understand, Uncle."

Lan Fan slowly closed his eyes. "Just... one more thing... Qiren."

"What is it, Uncle?"

"... Did you really pluck the cabbage?"

"..."

Wen Ruohan sighed.

Maybe he should have waited a day. Or two. Or three. Maybe forever.

He pressed his fingers against his lips as his brain kept replaying the soft, lingering kiss and Lan Qiren's voice asking him to not leave. Fuck, had he stayed any longer, Wen Ruohan wasn't sure if he could ever leave again. Once this whole thing was over, he would have to send that official marriage proposal as soon as possible. Or maybe he could convince RenRen to elope, eloping sounded way more romantic.

However, there was just no way for him to stay in Cloud Recesses any longer without possibly causing trouble to them. He had been walking around Qishan, some people had definitely recognized him. If words were to reach his father that he was in Gusu with the young master of Gusu Lan, there was no telling what the old man would do. He might send an army of cultivators to attack Cloud Recesses and Gusu Lan could not afford that, not with one of their elders down and their senior cultivators busy with cleansing the resentful energy.

Moreover with Zhao Wu still around, there was no telling if he, or someone else would not attempt to perform the same technique. Stealing someone else's body would be a pretty good way to escape from your pursuers.

He took a long, deep breath as soon as he reached Dafan Mountain. Heavens, he missed his cousin. Wen Ruoyu would want to know what happened to A Lin. Wen Ruohan never expected that he would find more traces of his brother, or that A Lin would somehow be linked to this case. He also wondered if Wen Ruoyu could also do something about Lan Fan. If Lan Fan could be saved, maybe Lan Qiren's heart could be at ease.

The village was weirdly quiet. Aside from the sound of farm animals, there were hardly people around, even though it was midday. Perhaps they had all gone back home for a lunch break? He walked through the wooden fence of the small house and knocked on the door. "Ruoyu? It's me. Are you home?"

There was a pregnant silence before a soft female voice answered. "Cousin Ruohan, come in."

Wen Ruoyu's wife slowly opened the door. Her expression did not look too good.

Puzzled, Wen Ruohan stepped inside.

His breath halted.

"Did you enjoy your little excursion, Wen Ruohan?"

No wonder all of the villagers had locked themselves in their homes. Sect Leader Wen had come for a 'surprise visit'.

The Qishan Wen leader took another sip of tea, then casually flung the tea cup to the side. It shattered against the wall, right next to where Wen Ruoyu was standing. The healer swallowed hard.

"You thought you were being smart, aren't you? You can choose to come back with me and follow my orders, or you can return the Yin Iron right now."

Chapter End Notes

LQR: Uncle, you're pretty energetic now.

LF: So did you or did you not eat that cabbage, Qiren?!

Aha, I'm late again... I got distracted by some...ehem, smut. Also the probably unnecessary backstory of Mdm Lan's poor didi... oh well, I'm still putting it anyway bcs I want to.

You're not alone

Normally around this time, the library of Cloud Recess would be filled with disciples studying or doing their work. However, it was a busy time for the entire Gusu Lan. Some of the senior disciples had yet to return and those who were present were occupied with playing Cleansing for Elder Lan Fan. Half of the elders were at meetings with Qingheng Jun, while the rest had to watch over the younger ones.

Hence, the only ones occupying the place were the four young cultivators doing their punishment, three of them being guest disciples and one being an actual guest who had barely even taken a glimpse at the walls of rules. They were now forced to sit down and copy the long passages thanks to Cangse Sanren, who suddenly started picking a fight with Yu Ziyuan. Unfortunately they chose the wrong spot to lash out their claws, for Lan Qiren would never hesitate to punish anyone, not even young masters and clan heirs.

Cangse Sanren murmured sulkily. "This is all your fault... stupid."

Yu Ziyuan glared at her. "Me? Who was the one who picked a fight first?"

Cangse Sanren stuck her tongue out. "I wasn't talking to you, mleh!"

The Meishan Yu top disciple rolled her eyes. "I've never met someone so uncouth. You're the one dragging us to this situation, yet you're still unrepentant."

"Oh, a young lady like you can't take a few punishments? You better not follow us then, it's going to be a rough journey," Cangse Sanren teased. "What are we going to do if our Yu meimei breaks a nail? Won't look nice with your expensive ring anymore."

"You... one day I'm going to break your arms and see if you dare to be so haughty again!"

"Oho, that's just what I like, bring it on!"

"Ladies," Wei Changze sighed, feeling exasperated. Why did he and Jiang Fengmian have to get punished too? He was just an innocent bystander. "Let's finish up quickly and get over with this."

Yu Ziyuan continued giving a stink eye at Cangse Sanren. "Why do I have to be punished too? I'm not a guest disciple."

"So long as we are guests of Cloud Recess, we still have to follow the rules," Jiang Fengmian said. "Maiden Yu, shall I help you? It's my fault that you got dragged into this."

Yu Ziyuan slammed the brush down against the desk. "Why do you have to help me, when it's this girl who caused the trouble? Why are you covering for her?"

Jiang Fengmian blinked. "I'm not covering for her-"

“Trouble? Me?! I don’t want to hear it from you,” Cangse Sanren huffed.

“Maiden Liang, please just stay still so the rest of us can finish,” Wei Changze rubbed his temples that were throbbing from the headache.

Cangse Sanren’s face turned sour. She looked away. “A Ze, you’re only nice to everyone but not me.”

Wei Changze blinked. “What do you mean?”

She did not answer. Instead she only huffed and stormed out from the library, jumping out straight from the window. Frowning, Wei Changze got up to chase her but Yu Ziyuan suddenly stopped him. “Let me.”

Wei Changze looked back at her, surprised. “Maiden Yu? But...”

Yu Ziyuan sighed. “Perhaps... there is a misunderstanding between us that needs to be cleared.”

Yu Ziyuan spotted the figure dressed in white from afar easily. After all, the red ribbon stood out quite a lot compared to other disciples who preferred monotonous colours. Not to mention, no upright member of Gusu Lan would be crouching in front of an ant-bed trying to play with ants. She walked over towards the sulking girl. “You sure are something, aren’t you.”

Cangse Sanren glanced up briefly to see who was talking to her, before turning her gaze to the ant-bed again. “What do you want?”

Yu Ziyuan sighed. She wondered why this girl was being hostile at her, but it wasn’t until Cangse Sanren uttered those words at the library earlier that she finally realized something. “You like Young Master Wei, don’t you?”

Cangse Sanren kept poking at the ant-bed with a stick. “Of course even a stranger would see. Only A Ze can’t see it.”

“... Alright, I’ll take that as an admission. I see no reason for you to keep acting like a jealous fool, because neither of us are pursuing each other,” said Yu Ziyuan.

Cangse Sanren pouted. “But A Ze likes you.”

“What in the world made you think that?”

“He would never invite me, but he invited you. He called you smart and beautiful.”

Yu Ziyuan rolled her eyes. “He was just flattering me to get me to come with your group, though I’m not sure what his intention is. Either way I have no interest in people like that.”

Cangse Sanren glared at her. “People like that? I’ll have you know that A Ze is amazing. He’s good-looking, he’s fast, he’s skilled, he has an amazing technique with ropes.”

“...” Yu Ziyuan wasn’t sure what the girl meant by the last one, but she sure as hell felt even less interest in Wei Changze after hearing that.

“Me... I have nothing,” Cangse Sanren murmured.

Yu Ziyuan humphed. “If his aim is to marry a woman for her wealth and prestige then he is not worth any decent woman’s time.”

“A Ze is not that kind of person!” Cangse Sanren argued.

“So? What’s your problem?” Yu Ziyuan crossed her arms. “Go ahead and pursue him. I’m not stopping you.”

She wasn’t sure why Wei Changze was trying to make her join their group but she wasn’t about to get into a pointless fight for a man she wasn’t even interested in. Though, that said Yu Ziyuan still would like to stay a little longer. Her martial sisters and herself were indebted to Yunmeng Jiang after all, she ought to help them to the end. It wasn’t because she thought Jiang Fengmian was sort of likeable. Well, he was a tolerable company... he was different from most pompous young masters she knew.

She respected him as a cultivator. It was rare to see such a skilled yet humble clan heir. Most of the clan heirs she met were so full of themselves. Jiang Fengmian was kind, polite, and considerate. She would have liked to see him more gutsy though, he was too nice and his friend was also quiet. It would be better for him to have someone more outspoken by his side, like...

Yu Ziyuan suddenly blushed. Cangse Sanren spotted it and narrowed her eyes, pointing her finger at the Meishan Yu disciple. “Hah! You’re blushing now! Still saying you don’t like him?”

“Nonsense! He is not my type!” Yu Ziyuan quickly denied. She cleared her throat. “Anyway, for once please use your brain. If I like him, would I come talking to you like this?”

Cangse Sanren pouted. “Really?”

“Really.”

“... You gotta help me get A Ze then,” she said.

Yu Ziyuan snorted. “Why do I have to help you with your love life? Do it yourself!”

“A Ze is too dense, he won’t notice my moves at all! I thought we were friends?”

“You hated me just three seconds ago.”

“Well, I like you now. I’ll even call you Yu Jiejie ah, how about that?”

Yu Ziyuan grimaced. “Gross. No, thank you.”

“How mean...!!!”

Lan Qiren took a deep breath before he finally gathered the courage to knock on the door. He had spent plenty of time contemplating this and he finally came to the decision. A faint voice called him to come in and Lan Qiren finally entered.

Qingheng Jun was sitting still in front of the window, seemingly in a meditative state. However, Lan Qiren knew he was far from being calm, nor was he actually meditating. The elders of Gusu Lan were still in the middle of discussion. Bai Yiqing had admitted to injuring Lan Fan but Qingheng Jun had gone to them stating that she was innocent, for Lan Fan was momentarily overtaken by the spirit. Unfortunately, while the elders did not state any punishment for the lady, they had yet to let her off the hook either.

In his past timeline Qingheng Jun probably had nothing he could say to defend her. Lan Qiren wasn’t there, only Bai Yiqing had seen the possessed Lan Fan trying to attack him and even then, she wanted to be punished. Hence, it did not take long for them to decide on her punishment. Someone important died and the perpetrator was admitting guilt and willing to be punished, what was there to be left?

“Xiongzhang,” Lan Qiren paused. “I am going to tell everything to the elders tomorrow. You don’t need to worry. Maiden Bai will not be punished.”

With Lan Qiren as the witness supporting Qingheng Jun's statement, Bai Yiqing should be freed from any charges. Right now some of the elders found it hard to believe Qingheng Jun, especially since he had expressed his wish to take her as his wife and protect her. They thought that Qingheng Jun was now too enamored to make the right decisions, hence his accounts could not be trusted completely. Lan Qiren could not help feeling a little irked that the elders completely ignored how his brother had not told a lie for as long as he could remember, yet when it came to the time when his actions did not suit their preference, they chose to not believe him.

Then again, wasn't he also on their side back then? He completely lost trust in his brother, especially after he was forced to shoulder the burden of leading the sect and raising his nephews later on. From there on, he strictly enforced the rules, making sure that his two nephews would live by them so that they would not stray and suffer like their father.

Qingheng Jun remained silent.

“Xiongzhang... if you’re in love with her, court her properly. Please don’t let her marry you out of guilt or gratitude,” Lan Qiren said.

He might risk Bai Yiqing leaving Cloud Recess. However, if that were to happen, he would push Qingheng Jun to chase her, to woo her, to get her to come back on her own volition, out of affection and not guilt. He would have to make sure that Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji will not only be born but also raised with love. It was an ambitious goal but Lan Qiren felt it was better than doing nothing. His conscience would not allow him to live knowing he let an innocent person be mistreated.

"The elders likely know. Doubting my words is just another excuse," Qingheng Jun suddenly spoke. "Their main concern now is her relation to Xue Yanzi. I tried refuting it, but Maiden Bai wants to take responsibility and said she is guilty of letting it happen."

Lan Qiren frowned. To think that the elders knew she was innocent, but was actually locking her up because of her relations to deviant cultivators...

"Uncle is still alive but there are countless victims who died from the unfortunate circumstances. Regardless of the motives, it is undeniable that Xue Yanzi's master practiced a forbidden technique and she is also his disciple. They will not let her roam free out of fear for the people's safety, at least not until they could be certain that she is harmless," Qingheng Jun added.

"You know she is not that kind of person!" Lan Qiren protested.

"The elders don't."

"Even Xue Yanzi himself was cursed by his own master to possess other people. Maiden Bai had no clue about those things!"

"What can I do when she's the one confessing everything?!" Qingheng Jun snapped. "I don't want her to be punished but she keeps insisting that she's complicit. Yet... I also wish to keep her here. I don't want her to leave, away from my eyes, when I don't know if she might do something to absolve herself."

Lan Qiren looked down as he recalled Lan Wangji's condition after Wei Wuxian's death back then. His nephew had lost the light in his eyes, as the love of his life was killed and condemned by the entire cultivation world. Until Wei Wuxian came back, he had continued mourning for him and Lan Qiren knew if it wasn't for Lan Yuan, things could have been worse.

Perhaps... back then, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji had also been the only reasons keeping Bai Yiqing alive, until she eventually succumbed to the stress and illness. Qingheng Jun mourned her death and secluded himself for the rest of his life, leaving Lan Qiren to take over his responsibility. Bai Yiqing was never relieved from her guilt and imprisoning her in that house did not help. She hid her grief underneath warm smiles in front of her children. Being plagued by guilt, she never voiced a single complaint even though locking up an innocent woman was inhumane.

"Xiongzhang, even so what you're doing is not right. Claiming that you're marrying her to protect her, isn't that almost like saying she does in fact deserves to be punished, except that you're sparing her?" Lan Qiren questioned.

“Demonic cultivators will not be forgiven. So will people related to them. Qiren, I know what I’m doing is wrong, but I do not wish to lose her.”

Lan Qiren shut his eyes and took a deep breath. He then looked at Qingheng Jun.
“Xiongzhong, the world is not black and white. Jin Guangshan doesn’t practice a deviant cultivation but he’s still an abomination.”

Qingheng Jun blinked. “... Why are you suddenly bringing up Jin Guangshan?”

“Even if she was the disciple of a deviant cultivator... even she did learn any kind of strange cultivation method from them, she did not participate in the murder spree. In fact she had been the one to try and stop them. She isn't to be blamed and that is something she needs to realize. Making her receive punishment for things she did not do... wouldn't it only further convince her belief that she was in the wrong?” Lan Qiren said.

Qingheng Jun pursed his lips.

Lan Qiren paused to take another long breath before he added, “Indeed, keeping an eye on her is important. But please don’t make her marry you out of obligation, that is all I’m asking. Ask her to stay, but not in exchange for marriage, because that is not how you treat a wife. That is just keeping her prisoner.”

Qingheng Jun fell silent. He stared at the wall in daze for a long moment, before he finally exhaled, then curved a small helpless smile. “I’m a terrible man. You’re my younger brother but you’re the one giving me guidance.”

Lan Qiren cleared his throat. “Supporting each other should be what brothers do.”

Qingheng Jun chuckled. "You've changed, Qiren. You've matured a lot. I almost cannot believe that you're my younger brother, who used to hate making friends in the past."

"I didn't hate it," Lan Qiren argued. It was just that he disliked going out, and he just didn't really click with the people around him.

Qingheng Jun nodded. "I was worried when you suddenly started befriending him, but I see now. You've grown as a person because of him. He completes you."

Lan Qiren blinked and stared at his brother for a moment, before his face flushed red. "Wen Ruohan has nothing to do with this!"

"I didn't even say his name and you already know who I was talking about," Qingheng Jun pointed with a hint of amusement.

Lan Qiren cleared his throat. “You are exaggerating. I’ve made my point clear now. I will leave you to rest for the night, Xiongzhong,” he said, then paused. Heat crept up his cheeks. Why did Qingheng Jun have to mention that name, now it felt difficult to voice his request. “Also... I would like to ask for your permission to leave tomorrow.”

“Where are you going? You just came back from a long trip outside,” Qingheng Jun asked.

“.... Dafan Mountain.”

A knowing smile appeared on Qingheng Jun’s face and Lan Qiren could not help being reminded of Lan Xichen’s expression. “And perhaps to Qishan, later?”

Lan Qiren coughed.

“Be careful, Qiren. Sect Leader Wen seems to be in a poor mood recently. He might not welcome any unexpected guests to his territory,” Qingheng Jun warned.

“Do you know what is going on in Qishan Wen, Xiongzhang?” Lan Qiren asked.

The older Lan only sighed and shook his head. “All I’m aware of is that there is an internal strife within the clan regarding the succession. Sect Leader Wen used to favour his firstborn a lot but there seems to have been a huge disagreement between them. He used to boast about his son, now...”

The disagreement likely came from the fact that Wen Ruohan had stolen the relic from his father and had even gone against him before that as well. Sect Leader Wen was not a fool, sooner or later he would realize that his sons and nephew had been plotting against him. Not to mention, Wen Ruohan had refused to attend the meeting with the fiancée arranged by his father.

“Don’t worry, Qiren. Be where you need to be,” said Qingheng Jun.

Lan Qiren slowly nodded. “Thank you... Xiongzhang.”

The meeting with elders did not go as bad as he expected. Lan Qiren was expecting as much resistance as when Lan Wangji defended Wei Wuxian. He had given his own statements and reported results of their investigation thoroughly, making sure that the elders knew only Master Zhao and Xue Yanzi were aware of the forbidden arts, and that Bai Yiqing was the one who had tried to stop the series of murders nonstop. Perhaps it also helped that Lan Fan was still alive, albeit barely, and Bai Yiqing had shown extreme remorse. While it was now likely that she would escape charges, unfortunately her physical and mental health were not very good.

Her mind was in disarray and her health was deteriorating from stress. Qingheng Jun had ordered for Bai Yiqing to be released and seen by healers. Now it was up for him to help her recover. At least this time, they won’t be separated and he wouldn’t have to sneak around to see her again. There was a lot of work to be done but Lan Qiren was positive as hard as it may be, it won’t be as bad as the future he had once lived through.

Morning came and Lan Qiren was getting ready to set off to Dafan Mountain. He went to look for A Zhao first thing in the morning after packing up some essential items in his

pouch.

A Zhao had temporarily been placed along with other young disciples of Gusu Lan. Since Lan Qiren had no idea when he would be returning, he asked for the elders to let A Zhao attend the classes along with the other young disciples.

“Are you going to look for Han Ge? Let me come with you too!” A Zhao insisted.

“The place we’re going to is a territory I’m not familiar with. It’s safer for you to stay here,” Lan Qiren said.

A Zhao pouted. “You said once it’s over, you’re going to marry Han Ge. Why did Han Ge leave? If he’s breaking the promise, I’m going to beat him up too!”

Honestly, Lan Qiren wanted to beat him up too for leaving like that. However, he was not about to expose A Zhao to the snake’s lair. He had no idea what was awaiting him after all. “A Zhao, you have to stay here and help look after your Bai Shijie. I’ll come back once I’ve given him a long lecture.”

A Zhao looked down. “Back then Wu Ge told us to stay in the temple because it’s safer than going with him. He never came back.”

Lan Qiren looked at the child with a conflicted expression and patted his head. “This place is my home. I will always return no matter what.”

Still sulking, A Zhao eventually nodded. Lan Qiren let out a long exhale and walked away.

He was surprised to see Jiang Fengmian, Wei Changze, Cangse Sanren, and Yu Ziyuan at the gate ready to 'ambush' him.

“Going without us? You can’t let us miss the fun, Second Young Master Lan,” Cangse Sanren winked.

“That’s right, haven’t we all agreed to help?” Jiang Fengmian said.

Lan Qiren's eyes twitched. “Don’t all of you have classes? What about your punishment?”

Yu Ziyuan crossed her arms. “I don’t have any. Also, isn’t this more important than classes now?”

“Zhao Wu has yet to be found. Young Master Nie will be coming back to us with more information soon. You shouldn’t shoulder this alone,” Wei Changze said.

Lan Qiren huffed. “The three of you just want to skip lessons.”

Cangse Sanren grinned and skipped over closer. “We know you want some good privy time with your future husband, but still...”

“Speaking nonsense!”

“Right, so we’re coming, okay?” Jiang Fengmian laughed.

Lan Qiren huffed. Unwilling to banter any longer, he turned and walked. The four young cultivators exchanged glances before they smiled and followed him, walking along. The journey was filled with small chatters from Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan, jokes and teases from Cangse Sanren, as well as occasional remarks from Wei Changze.

Lan Qiren would never admit it, but perhaps he was secretly glad that he was not alone.

Last time he had been to Dafan Mountain, it was with Wen Ruohan. It was their first trip together. Gusu and Huanying City were coincidental encounters. Or perhaps it was fated. No, if he thought carefully about it, he met Wen Ruohan because he had defied fate. They had come this long by defying fate, he was going to see through this to the end.

The village looked just the same as usual, with elders picking up herbs, adults pulling carts, and young children running around flying kites. They threw a brief passing glance at the visitors, watching them with curious eyes, which gave a little shiver to Lan Qiren. It was natural to be wary of strangers. Last time Lan Qiren came with Wen Ruohan, this time he was here with more outsiders.

However, he could sense a slight aura of hostility from them, which was weird. They were outsiders for sure, but it wasn’t unusual for outsiders to come seeking a place where healers were living. This sort of reaction was not what he expected.

Still, he came knocking at Wen Ruoyu’s door.

It took a couple more knocks before the door finally opened. Wen Ruoyu did not look as good as he did when Lan Qiren first met him. He looked a little thinner, he had eyebags that showed his lack of sleep, and while his hair was tied neatly, there were a few gray strands, which was very unusual for a man in his mid twenties, let alone a cultivator this young.

Wen Ruoyu scowled. “... It’s you.”

Lan Qiren swallowed hard. “Has Wen Ruohan ever come here?”

Wen Ruoyu had a conflicted expression. He slowly stepped aside. “Come in.”

"He's here?" Lan Qiren uttered, heart racing. He had not even thought of what to say to Wen Ruohan yet, all he could think about was to find him.

Wen Ruoyu sat down, his expression darkened. "... He's back in Qishan. Sect Leader Wen took him."

Lan Qiren's heart sank and his breaths halted.

"He found out about the Yin Iron."

Reunion

Chapter Notes

mfw I got the scenario in my head, but it's hard to get the words out... 😞

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Lan Qiren already expected that one day, Wen Ruohan might get caught. Sect Leader Wen was not a fool. There was no way he wouldn't find Wen Ruohan's long absence and 'failure' to locate the Yin Iron to not be suspicious. For someone of Wen Ruohan's calibre, why would it take him so long to locate one person, if not because he was on to something else?

However, Lan Qiren thought that when the time came... he would be with him. They could do something about it together. Now he really wished he could go to Wen Ruohan and knock some sense into him. Why did he leave, knowing he might get caught? Alone, what could he do against Sect Leader Wen?

"Sect Leader Wen already came here a few days ago. Ruohan had no choice but to return, our entire village here would be compromised otherwise," said Wen Ruoyu.

Lan Qiren scowled. "You are the Sect Leader's nephew. All of you are also his family. He can't possibly not care."

Wen Ruoyu exhaled and gazed at the windows. "The Sect Leader has long turned into a warped man now. He was always... well, not the most humble of course, but he wasn't as arrogant. He was strict but not as scary. Now none of us can predict him. One second he would laugh, the next second he would lose his temper."

Lan Qiren silently clenched his fists.

"Do you have any idea what Sect Leader Wen is planning?" Wei Changze asked.

"With Ruohan? Probably planning to get him married. I believe he has secured a marriage meeting with the daughter of a nobleman, a relative of his late wife. Ruohan already made him lose face once, he would not allow himself to lose face the second time," Wen Ruoyu shrugged.

Cangse Sanren gasped. "That can't be. We have to stop him!"

Wen Ruoyu harrumphed. "Stop him? What can you do? Once Sect Leader Wen sets his mind on something, nothing can stop him."

"Do you suggest we do nothing, then?" Jiang Fengmian questioned.

Wen Ruoyu drummed his fingers. "After Ruohan gets married, his position as the next leader will be firmer. I'll have the chance to talk to him later. Either way, the matters of Qishan Wen should not concern any of you, do not involve yourselves any further. If the demonic cultivator has been caught, there is no reason for you to seek him anymore, is there?"

Lan Qiren parted his lips to protest, but fell silent. Logically speaking, from Wen Ruoyu's perspective certainly there was no reason for him to go and see Wen Ruohan, let alone stop the wedding. He would only be causing trouble to Wen Ruohan and the villagers here, the people who practiced only healing cultivation and wanted to live in peace. Not only that, he might be inviting trouble to Gusu Lan as well.

However, if things were to take its natural course, Wen Ruohan would turn into the man they all feared in the future. Even Wen Ruoyu himself would die, leaving behind only his two children and some elderly relatives - who would then be hunted and die as well. Jiang Fengmian, Yu Ziyuan, Nie Yizhou, everyone would die. He would be the only person in this room to live.

Also...

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "Still, I'd like to talk to him."

Wen Ruoyu furrowed his brows. "I already told you it's useless-"

"Pardon me, but the two of us already know about the relic he stole," Wei Changze suddenly intercepted.

Lan Qiren gawked. Wen Ruoyu looked at Wei Changze in disbelief, before he groaned and shook his head. "That idiot..."

"Relic?" Jiang Fengmian repeated, feeling confused as he, Cangse Sanren, and Yu Ziyuan had not heard of any relic.

"You told us that he was taken right after he arrived, meaning you haven't heard in detail about the demonic cultivator, haven't you?" Wei Changze said. "The demonic cultivator has the ability to perform body possession. Young Master Wen possesses notes detailing the technique. Leaving him while he is in possession of the notes and the relic is too much of a threat to be ignored."

"Are you suggesting that my uncle might attempt to perform any sort of body possession? That is ridiculous..." Wen Ruoyu said, then suddenly paused. His face gradually changed and he appeared to be deep in thought.

"Is there something on your mind?" Wei Changze asked.

"... Back then, I first found out about the relic, by accident... it was because Sect Leader Wen asked for my medical expertise," said Wen Ruoyu. He paused, remaining silent for a long moment before he hesitantly added, "He has a chronic illness. A demonic toxin that has been plaguing him for several years has taken a toll on his body."

“Demonic toxin?” Lan Qiren repeated. He knew that before Wen Ruohan’s ascension as the leader in the future, his predecessor passed away allegedly from an illness, though he never knew what it was specifically.

“It was during a night hunt against a high level demon in his youth. He managed to impede the effect so far with his cultivation, but because of the toxin, his core has been damaged and he hasn’t ever been able to break through the next level since his prime. Now, I believe due to his failed attempt to try and use the relic, his golden core is no longer able to stop the toxin from spreading all over his body, and none of our healing techniques are working effectively to heal him,” said Wen Ruoyu.

Lan Qiren had no idea the leader of the most powerful sect was in fact suffering from such ailment. If these words had gotten to the other sects, surely it would affect Qishan Wen’s reputation. Wen Ruohan may be powerful but he was still quite young. The disease might have instilled fear in Sect Leader Wen that after his absence, his sect and clan would be in danger. That would explain the reason why he was so adamant about showing off his power and making sure the entire cultivation world would submit to Qishan Wen.

He wanted to continue keeping Qishan Wen at the top. One of the ways was to obtain a power greater than anyone in the entire cultivation world. Frankly, it was a pointless ambition, at least in Lan Qiren’s opinion. Even without Yin Iron or terrorizing other sects, Qishan Wen would not lose their position as one of the major sects. They were the biggest sect with the most followers. They had many talented people.

Wen Ruohan was the strongest cultivator of his generation. He did not need the relic to overpower anyone, he was plenty talented enough. Moreover, he even had Wen Ruoyu, one of the best healers of their generation as well, who would soon pass his talent to his children. Qishan Wen was the only major sect who had a branch specializing in medicine, they already stood at the top. Even Qingheng Jun, Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, and Jiang Wanyin were all young when they were forced to take the positions as the sect leaders, but they were all respected due to their strengths.

Then again, Lan Qiren was not someone ambitious, so how could he understand the feeling of someone so used to being at the top? Furthermore, being unable to reach the height of his potential must be very frustrating for someone as talented as Sect Leader Wen.

Though, this only raised his suspicion that Wei Changze’s assumption might be right. The Yin Iron and the amount of resentful energy it carried could take away someone’s rationality and influence their minds. Who was to say that Sect Leader Wen wouldn’t try to live longer, directly through his son?

The body-possession technique was most effective for someone blood-related, wasn’t it?

Wen Ruoyu shook his head. “Still, I find it hard to believe. No matter how rotten his heart has become, how could he possibly do that to his own son? How could he bear living as someone else for the rest of his life?”

“An insane person would have no qualms. Not only the relic, the demonic toxin may have gradually affected the way his mind works as well,” Wei Changze suggested.

“... Still...” Wen Ruoyu hesitated.

“You were willing to take the risk the first time and plotted with your cousins to steal and seal the relic. Why not take it the second time?” Wei Changze dared him.

Wen Ruoyu shut his eyes. He sighed. “.... Very well. What do you suggest?”

“Help us infiltrate Nightless City, specifically to where Wen Ruohan would be,” said Lan Qiren.

“This is... absolutely nuts. I’m not this kind of reckless person,” Wen Ruoyu muttered.

Wei Changze smiled. “Our motto at Yunmeng Jiang is to attempt the impossible. Isn’t that right, Fengmian?”

Jiang Fengmian chuckled. “Of course. After all we’ve been through, we can’t just let it go to waste.”

“... Forcing your motto on other people again...” Lan Qiren rolled his eyes

Cangse Sanren snickered. “I kinda like that motto! Besides, you’re the leader of this surprise mission, Second Young Master Lan.”

Wei Changze nodded. “To Second Young Master Lan, this would be the most important mission.”

Lan Qiren gawked. “You two...”

Jiang Fengmian laughed. “Now I’m the one being envious of your friendship with Second Young Master Lan, Changze.”

Wei Changze raised an eyebrow. “What, do you not want to see them happy?”

“Of course we all do!” Cangse Sanren cheered. She then grinned at Yu Ziyuan. “We’re going to support them, aren’t we?”

Yu Ziyuan crossed her arms. “I still think this is ridiculous... but since I’m here, I’ll help.”

Wen Ruoyu watched the young cultivators and only sighed. Their Qishan Wen Clan had rarely interacted with young masters of other clans, let alone form a friendship like this, it felt weird. However, it wasn’t an entirely bad feeling. He then realized something and eyed Lan Qiren suspiciously. “... The way you’re so desperate to see my cousin makes me think that you already fucked my cousin. Did you?”

Lan Qiren nearly spit out blood.

First his uncle, and now Wen Ruohan’s cousin.

"They've been sleeping together every night before this!" Cangse Sanren shamelessly exclaimed and the group had to stop Lan Qiren from trying to beat her up.

Alright, he knew that they were on an infiltration mission. Wen Ruoyu had graciously agreed to help them sneak into Nightless City, despite the risk on his own family and relatives. Not only that, Lan Qiren also risked incurring the wrath of Qishan Wen upon Gusu Lan, Yunmeng Jiang, and Qinghe Nie. He should be grateful. However...

“Why must I be rolled into a sheet?!” He shrieked.

“Shh!” Cangse Sanren shushed him. “You cannot act, so how else are we going to let you in?”

After descending Dafan Mountain, the group, this time also joined by Wen Ruoyu, had finally met up with Nie Yizhou at Qishan. The Nie Clan heir had even brought along with him new information regarding Zhao Wu. For a clan that mainly boasted their saber technique and collection, their ability to gather information was terrifying. The man was truly like his two sons combined.

Nie Yizhou brought along a concerning piece of news with him. Zhao Wu had actually been spotted near Qishan, not long after he had left Hudie Village. The last time he was seen, he had gotten into a fight with a bunch of drunkards at a local restaurant. He, along with the other drunkards, were arrested by the authorities for causing public disturbance, but they had no further information about him. If they wanted to retrieve Zhao Wu, they would have to deal with the authorities at Qishan.

Before this, the merchant from Hudie Village had been transporting rolls of silk and red fabric to the seamstress of Qishan. Now, according to Nie Yizhou, Qishan Wen had also ordered some items for dowry that were specially produced in Qinghe to be brought to Qishan. In addition, Sect Leader Wen had brought some luxury items from foreign traders, mostly in red. It was clear that a marriage was to take place and it was for someone special, like the heir himself. Qishan Wen may be prideful, but they were more of the type to flaunt their power, not their wealth, they wouldn't buy luxury items for the sake of spending money.

Now, Wen Ruoyu could go in and out of Nightless City, as he was given access to most buildings there due to his status as Sect Leader Wen's nephew and the clan's main healer. However, he could not possibly bring in strangers, especially not outsiders. Hence, Wen Ruoyu first went inside while they waited in the nearby city, and came back to them with some stolen servants' uniforms. Nie Yizhou then bribed one of the merchants bringing in the items to let them sneak in along with the goods.

He also volunteered to continue looking for Zhao Wu in the meantime by mingling around with people in charge of the law enforcement in Qishan. Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan waited outside the Nightless City, ready to act in case of emergency if they were caught or did not return within time. Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren put on disguises as a couple of servants carrying in the newly bought loads. Lan Qiren unfortunately was rolled into one of

the silk red bed sheets, as they were all not convinced that he would be able to lie his way through.

“Make your body smaller, Second Young Master,” Cangse Sanren whispered.

“It would have been easier if you were inside here... or rather, if all of us are disguised,” Lan Qiren grumbled.

“Neither of us are young masters of a famous clan, our faces are not quite known. Someone as good-looking as Second Young Master Lan would attract attention quickly,” Wei Changze said.

“Aren’t you putting on disguises?”

“Oh, no disguise is good enough to hide your beauty~” Cangse Sanren said in a sing-song voice and Lan Qiren grimaced.

“What are you two doing?” A stern male voice suddenly shocked them and Lan Qiren gulped when the cart he was in stopped.

“We’re carrying the new goods inside,” Wei Changze said.

It must be one of the Qishan Wen disciples in charge of making the rounds or inspecting the goods, who was questioning them. “What’s inside? Let me see.”

The thick cloth covering the goods opened and Lan Qiren held his breath.

“Aii aii, aiyah... don’t touch the things with your dirty hands! I can see oil on your hands, do you want to leave your pig smell on these? These are expensive, you know!” Cangse Sanren shouted.

“Tskk, what a loud woman... fine, go ahead.”

Lan Qiren blinked. It was a close call but they had finally made their way inside. He could hear an older lady's voice calling Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren to quickly unload their goods into the storage room so that they could inspect them later. The door closed, and Wei Changze tapped on the cart. "You can come out now."

They unrolled him from the bed sheet. Lan Qiren took a deep breath. "Alright, so where do we go from here?" He asked.

"That was a close call, good thing they have so many people here it doesn’t look like they remember every single face around," said Cangse Sanren, exhaling from relief. "Well, it’d be weird for us to walk around with a large cart from here on but... luckily as you can see, they keep all the good stuff here in the same room..." she paused, examining all the items in the storage room. “Oh look, must be a carpet bought from a foreign merchant. Let’s roll you up in this stuff and send you to Wen Ruohan's room."

Lan Qiren grimaced. "I have to be wrapped like a spring roll again?"

"It's the safest way I can think of," said Cangse Sanren. "Wen Ruoyu already told us the way to Wen Ruohan's room. From here, it's up to you to get him back. A Ze will wait at the garden in case you guys have to jump from the window, I'll mingle around with the other servants."

He resigned to fate and let Wei Changze roll him like a little evening snack with the large carpet. Good thing he was a cultivator, no normal human could stand having to be constricted and holding their breath multiple times for this long! He could faintly hear Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren greeting the other servants casually as they made their way to the young master's chamber.

"Ah yes, I've noticed a small stain on the rug inside the room..." Wei Changze made up an excuse as they were stopped by a couple of other servants.

"He doesn't really mind a little stain, shouldn't you prepare the guest room for the lady?" The other servant said. "She will be arriving in a couple of days."

"I will be doing the lady's room, no worries," Cangse Sanren quickly said.

"Hm... very well, as long as it's done."

Lan Qiren could feel his heart beating fast. The lady was arriving in a couple days. If he had hesitated any longer, if he had reached here any later, Wen Ruohan would already be meeting her and he might not have any chance to speak to him anymore.

Still, for a clan this big, this whole event seemed rushed, especially since there were rumours that the lady was from a good family. Back when Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli were getting married, all the sects had received invitations weeks prior and Jin Guangshan made sure to let the whole world know even when they were just engaged. Even Jin Guangyao, who was an illegitimate child and was acknowledged only after the SunShot Campaign, had his engagement announced as well as a decent wedding with a decent amount of guests - everyone knew about it. Why was Wen Ruohan, heir to the currently strongest cultivation sect getting engaged without any of the sects receiving the news?

Even if Lan Qiren was out of the loop because he had been out travelling, Nie Yizhou would have known if they had made the announcement since he just came back from Qinghe. However, it was clear that this time, Sect Leader Wen wanted to keep the wedding private. Lan Qiren had a feeling what caused this change.

Wen Ruohan did not return in time for the matchmaking meeting. He had been out and in contact with young heirs of other clans instead, which never happened in the previous timeline.

Sect Leader Wen was hiding something, that was for certain.

"Young master, we are here to change the carpet and -" Lan Qiren heard Cangse Sanren's voice spoke.

"Leave it there, you are dismissed."

For a moment his heart stopped beating. That was Wen Ruohan's voice. Lan Qiren could recognize it very well by now, it was the same voice he woke up to nearly every morning and the voice he often listened to before sleep, for days. It was the voice that spoke to him plenty of times, one that annoyed him, one that angered him, one that soothed him.

(It was the voice that he missed, even though he would never admit it.)

The door closed. Lan Qiren waited quietly for Wen Ruohan to 'unroll' him but all he heard was the sound of pages being turned. He scowled. Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren were supposed to release him from the carpet but since Wen Ruohan didn't want to be disturbed, the two 'servants' in disguise had to leave him here, still trapped within the roll. Wen Ruohan was likely occupied with something and didn't even look at the 'servants' coming in, otherwise he would have sensed something.

Also, Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren, those two jerks! They chose to leave him here in this state instead of revealing themselves to Wen Ruohan!

He wriggled around to release himself, knocking down some things he could not see to the floor. Lan Qiren silently berated himself inside. It sounded like a teacup shattering.

"Who's there?" Wen Ruohan's voice was cold, as cold as the blade touching his back.

Lan Qiren petrified as the sharp tip sliced through the thick layer that wrapped his body.

He slowly turned around and was met with Wen Ruohan's shocked eyes. Wen Ruohan looked just as he remembered.

"Why..."

Lan Qiren pursed his lips and glared at him. "Idiot. Why did you leave without a word? No manners, no apology-"

Before he could even finish his sentence, his arm was pulled up and his face bumped against Wen Ruohan's broad chest as the Qishan Wen heir locked him in an embrace. It was as if a silencing spell had been casted on him. His lips parted with a short gasp but no more words came out. Wen Ruohan's familiar scent filled his mind and heat crept up his cheeks as he felt arms wrapped on his back, pressing him against the other more tightly. Wen Ruohan's sword was left dropped onto the floor. Lan Qiren noticed it was not Wen Ruohan's spiritual sword but an ordinary one.

He was going to question why his spiritual sword was not with him, but then all thoughts were gone the moment Wen Ruohan's warm breath hit Lan Qiren's ear as he whispered. "RenRen. Lan Qiren. Second Young Master Lan, is it really you?"

Lan Qiren humphed, his fingers clutched on the red seams of Wen Ruohan's robes. "Who else?"

Wen Ruohan laughed. He cupped Lan Qiren's cheek and tilted his head up. "This is not the way I'd like to invite you to Nightless City. How did you get in?"

“Your cousin got us in.”

“I didn’t expect Ruoyu to help. He usually isn’t too friendly with strangers,” said Wen Ruohan. “Unless something happened?”

“Why are you suddenly getting married?” Lan Qiren questioned.

Wen Ruohan fell silent at first. He then tightened his hold on Lan Qiren. “I’m not.”

“You can’t possibly escape this time. You are in your father’s territory. Who is the lady, and how much will Qishan Wen suffer if you offend her?” Lan Qiren questioned.

Wen Ruohan sighed. “She’s only the daughter of a local nobleman, a distant relative of my mother. Nobody will be offended... well they might be, but nobody that I cared enough will be offended if I reject her.”

“Then...”

“My father has been sick for several years. He’s paranoid. He’s desperate to keep the clan tradition and strength, hence why he wants me to succeed. He is so afraid that our clan will crumble,” Wen Ruohan said.

“But why would he? Qishan Wen is already strong as it is,” Lan Qiren pointed.

Wen Ruohan grunted. “He’s very insecure. And seeing A Lin gone, seeing that his own children were rebelling against him... I suppose he’s afraid that he will soon completely lose his influence. Perhaps this is just a show of power to him, forcing me to follow his every plan. I don’t intend to obey him.”

“Then why are you here?”

Wen Ruohan shrugged. “In the end I’m still one man. Ruoyu and his people are also in danger if I refuse to return.”

“... You have no plan at all, don’t you?”

“RenRen, have mercy. I’m still trying to figure it out,” Wen Ruohan said.

“Wen Ruohan, what happened to the notes and the Yin Iron?” Lan Qiren asked.

Wen Ruohan looked conflicted for a second. He then sighed.

“He confiscated everything.”

yes, I wanted LQR rolled in a carpet like Elizabeth Taylor in the Cleopatra movie...
heheh

(... lowkey want them to pluck each other right away in the throes of passion)

Gremlin's big brain energy

Chapter Notes

I'm back, after almost a month of not updating this fic TvT

SVSS was taking more of my attention for a while but now my long SVSS fic is finally done! Also... ALL OF YOU ARE FREAKING FORTUNE TELLERS. Or is the plot that predictable? I kept wondering if I should change the plot since everyone keeps figuring out what is going to happen, but in the end I decided to just stick to my outline.

So a bit rant here: I've been made aware that someone is posting my work on Wattpad in Spanish without crediting me, and that the person has also done this to others as well (translating their fics and claiming the stories as their own). If you see any story that is a copy-paste or a translation claimed to be their own story, please report it. I think most authors would be honoured to have their work translated, but PLEASE credit the original authors. I'm only posting on AO3, so if you see my works on other sites uncredited, that's not me.

Alright, sorry for the rant QAQ now back to the story

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Of course he should never expect Wen Ruohan to have actually thought of a proper plan. This man was so powerful he probably rarely ever had to think of a contingent plan or an elaborate plot, he would just go in full force into the enemy camp. However, when faced against a stronger party who also had the advantage of, say, like items that could possibly destroy the cultivation world and also take over your body forcefully, shouldn't you start using your brain?

Lan Qiren pounded his fist against Wen Ruohan's chest in frustration. "You're an idiot. You know that, don't you?"

"Have mercy, RenRen," Wen Ruohan said helplessly. "I thought he was just going to ask for the Yin Iron and for me to come back. I returned the item to him, who knew he would even take my entire qiankun pouch and spiritual sword too..."

"You even let him take your qiankun pouch and your sword? How in the world are you going to survive now?!" Lan Qiren spluttered.

"Alright, alright, I'm an idiot, I admit it," Wen Ruohan said and squeezed the younger male in his arms tighter, pressing their bodies closer as if he intended to stick himself to Lan Qiren forever. "I left my heart and my brain with you, I'm just an empty shell without you, RenRen."

“What brain? I have no idea what you’re thinking. Were you even thinking when you left?” Lan Qiren gritted his teeth.

“I was just trying to keep you out of danger,” Wen Ruohan said. “Gusu Lan is not ready for an attack from Qishan Wen. I told you that my father believes in ‘setting the standard’ for other sects. Once he has an excuse to attack - such as another sect keeping his son away - he will do it. At least with Ruoyu... Ruoyu is also his family, he won’t do anything too extreme.”

“We’ve been traveling together all this time. We could have discussed this together,” Lan Qiren uttered. “Why did you think you can go through this alone?”

“I didn’t,” Wen Ruohan admitted.

“You didn’t think. You fool.”

Wen Ruohan loosened up his hold a little to tilt Lan Qiren’s head up, pressing their foreheads together. “I really didn’t. In my mind I just wanted to keep you away from danger.”

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. “Did you not expect me to be concerned about your safety? You selfish little -”

His words were stuck there, as Wen Ruohan closed the gap and pressed his lips against Lan Qiren’s.

Lan Qiren stood there in a daze. Feeling embarrassed but also reluctant to push the other away, he closed his eyes and let the older male to guide him, giving in to the gentle coaxing to part his lips and deepen the kiss.

It was so funny how in his past life after living for over five decades, he had never been romantically or sexually involved with anyone. Just seeing any public display of affection was enough to make him lash out with a long lecture, especially if it was from his impertinent nephew-in-law. Yet, gestures and acts like this with Wen Ruohan somehow not only did not feel repulsive, but even felt good. It was only embarrassing and rather than being repugnant, all Lan Qiren could think about was how inappropriate that they weren’t even married yet.

The hand pressing on his back suddenly travelled downwards to his bottom and Lan Qiren’s face instantly heated up. He quickly shoved Wen Ruohan and gulped in a breath of air as his breath was held for considerably a long time. He glared at Wen Ruohan. “Improper. We’re in a perilous situation and you’re thinking inappropriate things?”

Wen Ruohan licked his lips and only looked smug. He tried reaching for Lan Qiren’s waist again but his hand was swatted. He pouted. “I haven’t held you in bed for a long time, RenRen. Waking up without you was hard.”

“It was only a few days and do not speak as if we’ve done anything!”

Wen Ruohan grinned. “We can do something.”

Lan Qiren's face flushed. "Don't be ridiculous. We are not going to do anything until we can remedy this situation."

Wen Ruohan crossed his arms. "What do you suggest?"

"Well-"

There were footsteps approaching them. Alarmed, Wen Ruohan quickly glanced around his room looking for a place for Lan Qiren to hide. He opened the closet and shoved a stunned Lan Qiren in. "Sorry, stay inside for a second!"

He shut the closet and Lan Qiren gawked alone in the darkness. Luckily the closet of the esteemed Qishan Wen heir was large enough to fit a grown up male, though it was admittedly not the most comfortable place to stay himself.

"Father."

Lan Qiren gulped as he heard Wen Ruohan's voice from inside the closet. It turned out that the person coming into the room was none other than the Sect Leader of Qishan Wen himself. No wonder Wen Ruohan panicked. If they were found in their... well, if they were caught in their act earlier, no doubt there would be no mercy from Sect Leader Wen. A cultivator from a different sect had snuck into their territory and was making out with his son, whom he was planning to marry off very soon.

Lan Qiren's face once again heated up for a moment as he realized just a little while ago, he and Wen Ruohan had just shamelessly locked lips like two touch-starved people. He really wanted to slap himself so bad.

"Are you throwing a fit again?"

At first Lan Qiren was confused why Sect Leader Wen had asked that, then he remembered that the remnants of the sliced up carpet used to 'transport' him was still on the floor. Sect Leader Wen likely thought that Wen Ruohan had damaged the expensive carpet in a show of protest of his decision.

"The carpet is so ugly it offended my eyes," Wen Ruohan said.

"Grow up and cease your tantrums," Sect Leader Wen warned him.

"You should grow up and cease your obsession with controlling your children as well. I'm an adult now," Wen Ruohan argued.

"You know nothing."

"I know your health is failing now."

"Then do your filial duty and get married. What is wrong with the lady I picked?"

"I'm not interested in women."

There was a momentary pause, before Sect Leader Wen then added, “As long as she gives birth to an heir, you can take in any male concubine you want.”

Wen Ruohan scoffed. “You’re telling me that not only should I treat my late mother’s relative - a young, innocent woman who knows nothing - as a breeding tool, but I should also disrespect the man I love by making him a lowly concubine?”

Lan Qiren could feel his heart racing. He covered his own mouth to stop himself from emitting a single noise.

“... I see. The way you speak - I understand why you’re against this. You’re in love, aren’t you?” Sect Leader Wen growled. “For you to be so concerned about his standing, he must be someone from a fairly well-known clan or sect. Which one? One of those you’ve been travelling with?”

“If I am, will you call off the wedding?”

“Do not be ridiculous, Wen Ruohan. You intend to end our clan here?”

“Ruoyu is married, father. We have so many relatives-”

“And none of them is as talented. None of them carries my blood, not Wen Mao’s blood, but my blood. Only you... you alone, was born with my potential...”

“Stop trying to live your life and ambition through me. The talent I have comes from my hard work, not the blood inside me. The clan isn’t going to die just because I refuse to marry a woman,” Wen Ruohan continued to argue. “Our Qishan Wen will remain the strongest even without that relic, so stop trying to use that thing too. You were so proud of our cultivation and our martial arts, yet you’re spouting about bloodline.”

"Why should our talent be passed down to strangers?"

"Yet you want other sects to submit to us? You're being hypocritical."

There was a sound of a loud slap and someone falling to the floor. Lan Qiren wanted to go out and just grab Wen Ruohan with him so much but he knew it was too dangerous to do that in the presence of Sect Leader Wen. He cupped his mouth to hold his gasp from escaping.

"Insolence!!" Sect Leader Wen roared angrily.

"I'm insolent?! You're fucking mad!" Wen Ruohan yelled back.

"Is this how you're speaking to your father, your sect leader?!" Sect Leader Wen raised his voice even louder.

"Go ahead and kick me out if you dare!!"

"You came from my blood, I *own* you!"

"You do not own me and I don't want to be reminded about your ballsacks!"

A knock on the door put a stop to the heated argument. Another new voice had joined them and entered the room. "Father, I have something to report."

The voice belonged to none other than Sect Leader Wen's second son - the younger brother of Wen Ruohan and older brother of Wen Lin - Wen Rongzhi. As far as Lan Qiren knew, Wen Rongzhi was as remarkable as Jin Zixun was in Lanling Jin - no talent, just connections. After the death of Sect Leader Wen, he had been sent away to lead a branch clan, only to pass away from a mysterious illness not long after Wen Ruohan took over the position. He was forgotten very quickly, for he had accomplished nothing that brought fame to the clan.

"What is it?" Sect Leader Wen sounded impatient.

"I have examined all the items in the pouch and read the notes."

"The content?"

"You might want to have a look at them yourselves. They are Wen Lin's handwritings, so... I think that man might actually have a purpose for us now."

Lan Qiren swallowed nervously and furrowed his brows. That man? Who were they talking about?

"Have you interrogated him? How worthy is the content of that thing for us?" Sect Leader Wen asked again.

"Well..." Wen Rongzhi paused. "He refused to answer me and I didn't really get them..."

"You can't summarize them for me and you can't even interrogate a little rat yourself?" Sect Leader Wen asked, his voice indicating that he was even more annoyed now.

Wen Ruohan snorted. "Dearest little brother can barely understand our clan's cultivation manual, do you expect him to understand a completely different manual?"

Wen Rongzhi hissed. "You... you talk big for someone who can't even stay loyal to the clan. You and that bastard Wen Lin are both the same trash!"

"The man who sired these trash is here, Rongzhi. A trash like me is at least more useful than a flea like you," Wen Ruohan sneered.

"Wen Ruohan!!" Wen Rongzhi, angered, was drawing out his sword.

"Both of you, silent!" Sect Leader Wen roared, and his order was followed by an obedient silence. "You're a disgrace, Rongzhi. If you were more like your older brother I wouldn't have so much trouble. Useless. You, on the other hand, Ruohan, is truly an arrogant, troublemaker. If you were more obedient to me you would have been perfect."

Sect Leader Wen was truly merciless, Lan Qiren thought. To compare two blood-related brothers like this, no wonder both of them despised each other. Moreover, to say that Wen Ruohan wasn't as perfect as he desired because he wasn't obedient enough was very irksome to Lan Qiren.

"Rongzhi, return to your room and make yourself useful by shutting yourself there. Ruohan, you're also forbidden from leaving this room until the lady comes. When she arrives, the least you can do is to not make our clan lose face."

With that, the two father and son left and the door slammed shut.

Lan Qiren exhaled from relief. He nearly fell out when Wen Ruohan opened the closet to let him out.

His expression was grim. "You should leave for now, RenRen."

Lan Qiren's eyes widened. "Did you not just hear what your father said? Those are not words of a normal father, Wen Ruohan."

"Even so, I can't bear risking your safety. He's going to keep me under strict supervision."

"And you're just going to leave it to fate?"

Wen Ruohan smiled. "Of course not. You came all the way here, how can I not do something?"

"...."

"He's not going to let his guard down, not until the wedding day," said Wen Ruohan. "If there is one time that I will be given my sword and my privacy, it'd be on my wedding night. I'll escape then. At this rate, this clan will be ruined. If that were to happen, I will rebuild it with Ruoyu, even if I have to fight against my own father and brother."

His plan made sense. True, Sect Leader Wen's guard would be off as soon as his plan was fulfilled. However, there was no telling if Wen Ruohan would still be safe until then.

Moreover, that would also mean that he would still perform the three bows with another woman. The thought actually hurt Lan Qiren and he loathed just imagining it.

Damn it. He had been in denial all this time but realizing that his heart was burning with jealousy, he couldn't lie to himself anymore.

"RenRen, just wait for me, okay?" Wen Ruohan said, pulling him in a tight embrace.

It was completely unfair, the way his mouth was telling him to leave, yet his arms were not letting go.

Jiang Fengmian sat up from his earlier meditative pose. He patted the dust off his clothes. "They're taking longer than expected. I'm worried."

Yu Ziyuan looked up at the sky. "It's not yet the time. Anyway we already established what to do in case of emergency. Let's wait a little more."

Jiang Fengmian appeared to still be concerned, but conceded and sat down again. It was a little awkward, just him and a lady he had only known for several days in the inn room. However, they were here on a special mission. A mission that may put their own sects at risk as well. Jiang Fengmian knew if his parents found out about the danger Sect Leader Wen possessed, they would not let it sit either. He looked at Yu Ziyuan. "Are you okay with this?"

Yu Ziyuan raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

"We're up against Qishan Wen after all. Is Meishan Yu not going to be affected, in case our involvement is discovered?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

Yu Ziyuan pondered for a moment. "If Sect Leader Wen is someone who would treat his own kin with injustice, then he is not worth respecting. I believe if Wen Ruohan is set to be the next leader, then it would be better for us to help him and develop a good relationship now."

Jiang Fengmian chuckled. "You really are admirable, Maiden Yu."

Yu Ziyuan felt heat creeping up her cheeks and quickly turned her head away. "Hmph. The things I said are only common sense."

Jiang Fengmian sighed. "Well, not everyone uses their common sense..."

Like that little devil, Cangse Sanren, Yu Ziyuan thought. Though, she had to admit although the other was not quite someone she would get along with, there was something about her that was quite endearing as well. Yu Ziyuan thought the way she was crushing on Wei Changze and being jealous of her was quite cute. The way she confronted people however told Yu Ziyuan that she would only be able to tolerate the girl for one incense stick of time at most.

Oh well, they sort of promised to support each other (albeit one-sided, since Cangse Sanren was the one insisting on starting the friendship on her own) so Yu Ziyuan would bear with it. There was no harm in seeing two people who liked each other getting together, right?

Even now, though Lan Qiren insisted that he was going after Wen Ruohan for the sake of preventing future calamities upon the cultivation world, the rest of them all had a second agenda in their heads - to get those two together as well.

Jiang Fengmian tapped his fingers. "It's almost sunset. Shall we -"

His words halted, as the door opened. Wei Changze, Cangse Sanren, and Lan Qiren had returned. Seeing their grim expression and the lack of Wen Ruohan with them, it was obvious that the plan did not go as smoothly as they hoped, though it also appeared that they were fortunately not caught.

They waited for Nie Yizhou to come back, before Lan Qiren finally informed them of what had occurred when he managed to sneak into Wen Ruohan's room.

Jiang Fengmian crossed his arms. "Escaping on his wedding night? Sounds plausible, but what if they do actually put on guards on his wedding night? What if the nuptial wine was drugged?"

"Also, by that time he's already someone else's husband! How can we let that happen!" Cangse Sanren argued.

Lan Qiren fell silent. What else was he supposed to say?

Nie Yizhou hummed. "Should we just... storm in there and ruin the wedding?"

"If storming inside is that easy..." Lan Qiren paused. Then Lan Xichen wouldn't have needed Meng Yao to help infiltrate Nightless City during the SunShot Campaign. Not to mention the consequences they would face later. He glanced at Nie Yizhou. "Did you find something about Zhao Wu? Sect Leader Wen and his other son are now researching the notes. If they ever get their hands on him..."

Nie Yizhou rubbed the back of his head. "Well, exactly why we need to storm in. They already did."

Lan Qiren froze. "What do you mean by that?"

"Zhao Wu came here, not long after the mission at Huanying Village with the doppelganger water demon. He made ruckus, got arrested, then released. Then he tried to break into Nightless City and was caught again," said Nie Yizhou.

"WHAT?!" Lan Qiren choked.

"People thought he was just a thug trying to steal some valuable items from Nightless City. I have a feeling he purposely went there for... well," Nie Yizhou shrugged.

"To look for Wen Lin," Wei Changze connected the dots. "He and Wen Lin separated in a hurry to escape pursuers from Yueyang Chang. They must have set a meeting point but when Wen Lin failed to show up, Zhao Wu might think he either returned home or got caught by his own people, hence he came here to look for Wen Lin."

"Do you think he's still in there?" Jiang Fengmian said.

Nie Yizhou shrugged. "It's highly possible. A drunk person making a ruckus in the street is not Qishan Wen's business, but the moment he tries to break into Nightless City, he is Qishan Wen's prisoner. Nobody actually knows whether or not he has been released by Qishan Wen later, but I suspect they might keep him for interrogation. You mentioned they were talking about a rat, didn't you, Second Young Master Lan?"

Lan Qiren recalled the conversation that took place while he was hidden in the closet. He held his breath for a moment as he realized the man that they had been talking about was indeed none other than Zhao Wu. Moreover, they knew. Since they had connected the notes written by Wen Lin to Zhao Wu, this confirmed that Zhao Wu really did come to Qishan to look for Wen Lin. It was probably the reason why he was still being kept alive - any thief aiming to steal from Qishan Wen no doubt would be obliterated already, but Sect Leader Wen wanted to retrieve the Yin Iron. He would need to keep anything or anyone linked to Wen Lin, whom he initially thought had stolen the relic.

"Ohoo..." Cangse Sanren hummed. "I know this is a serious matter, but I guess... they really are married huh. If he only wanted the notes he could have just gone back to the temple, but he abandoned the notes and went to look for his husband first."

Lan Qiren clenched his fists.

Zhao Wu came back for Wen Lin, leaving everything behind, risking everything. It was truly a thoughtless move, considering he never knew if Wen Lin was even alive, or if Wen Lin had betrayed him and ran away with the notes, to misuse the knowledge.

He never understood how people could be so blinded by love before.

Now he felt as if he understood why Wangji was willing to take those 33 strikes for Wei Wuxian and waited over a decade for him. It was a feeling that he could not explain with logic or rationality.

It really can't be anyone but him.

"I have to find ways to stop him," he murmured. "Before the wedding."

Wei Changze smiled. "You mean 'we', right?"

Jiang Fengmian chuckled. He then frowned. "But Changze, how do you suppose we should stop it? The bride is coming very soon, we don't have enough time to gather people to fight against Qishan Wen."

Wei Changze smirked. "Who says we are going to fight? We will be entering there, peacefully, welcomed by the people of Qishan themselves."

"How?" Yu Ziyuan questioned.

"Let things take its natural course, of course. There is one group of strangers that will be allowed in, no question asked, escorted to the ceremonial hall," said Wei Changze.

Cangse Sanren's eyes lit up. "Oo, oohh!! A Ze, I have a feeling I know what you're talking about and I'm liking your plan!"

"What is it, Changze?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

Wei Changze chuckled. "We are going to hijack the bridal procession," he said, then paused to look at Lan Qiren. "Rather than stopping the wedding, wouldn't replacing the bride be

more convenient?"

Lan Qiren; "....."

Of course Wei Changze, this mad gremlin would suggest something outrageous like that.

Chapter End Notes

WRH: Waking up without RenRen is hard, but waking up with RenRen is even harder.

LQR: What does that even mean?

WRH: (๐ 5 ๐)

also wondering, do people want 'meat' in this story?

Fake bride, Genuine feelings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"This... this is absolutely ridiculous. There is no way this is going to work," Lan Qiren uttered.

"Yes it will," Cangse Sanren insisted. "You will be sitting down, dressed in multilayered garments and a veil over your head. Nobody will know."

Lan Qiren's eyes twitched. "If so... why the need to shave my beard?!" He asked, pointing at the razor in Cangse Sanren's hand.

She blinked innocently. "Why, our lovely bride can't have a beard, obviously."

"You said nobody will see!"

"The palanquin will be raised quite high, the wind is strong, there might be a possibility of someone seeing the lower half of your face," Wei Changze said.

"And what about the makeup?!"

Leave it to Wei Changze to suggest something so ridiculous. Lan Qiren's mind flashed back to all the embarrassing moments of his life, mostly triggered by Wei Changze's planting dumb and reckless thoughts into his head. It all began with his idea of seducing the enemy to prevent the future war. Well, Lan Qiren never intended to employ that tactic, but here he was now, so deep into the plan and unable to escape anymore, because he ended up completely fallen for the 'enemy' instead.

He was certain that one day he would look back on this day and think, '*why did I agree to this?*'

Within the couple of days they had left, Nie Yizhou managed to secure a wedding dress - by purchasing a used one from an unsuspecting noble lady, using the excuse that they were trying to lure a vengeful ghost bride with it. Yu Ziyuan had some powders, rouge, and lip colour in her storage pouch that she carried around since she originally was going to escort her martial sister to Lanling Jin. Jiang Fengmian was able to procure a good selection of hair pins and accessories from the market that did not look cheap.

For a group who claimed they were there to help prevent incoming calamities and injustice, Lan Qiren thought they were way too enthusiastic to participate in what was supposed to be just a 'side mission'. Weren't they supposed to be more concerned about how to escape once they entered?!

"As beautiful as Second Young Master Lan is, you're still unmistakably a man and we can't risk exposing your identity. No worries, our Yu Jiejie will make sure you look like the perfect

bride, right?" Cangse Sanren said and winked at Yu Ziyuan.

Lan Qiren looked at the Meishan Yu disciple with a deadpan expression. "Please tell me you have no intention of going along with this impossible plan."

Yu Ziyuan hummed. "Which powder should we use, Maiden Liang?"

Lan Qiren; "...." *She lured her in* . Cangse Sanren lured Yu Ziyuan in, the same way Wei Wuxian had dragged the normally hot-tempered Jiang Wanyin to join his shenanigans.

Nie Yizhou entered the room along with Jiang Fengmian carrying a bundle of fabric. "We got the wedding dress fixed, thanks to Changze's sewing skills. I couldn't find shoes that will fit you though, how about we paint your boots red?"

"Absolutely not," Lan Qiren immediately declined.

Fortunately it turned out that the outfit that had been adjusted were long enough to hide the colour of Lan Qiren's boots, so as long as he was careful enough to not trip and walk in short strides, it should be fine.

"Once you descend the palanquin, we'll have your Wen Gege carry you all the way so you won't even have to walk," Cangse Sanren teased.

This is a sacrifice to ensure a better future for the next generation, Qiren , he told himself as he begrudgingly let Yu Ziyuan powder his face. To think that Cangse Sanren now had actually made Lan Qiren himself shave his own beard... shameful, so shameful!

Cangse Sanren giggled. "Our bride is ready! What do you all think?"

Lan Qiren looked at his own reflection in the mirror.

He thought that he looked awkward - a tall, well-built man in a female wedding dress and makeup. Moreso, he felt so weird, dressed as a bride knowing he was without a groom...or rather, about to steal someone else's groom.

Wei Changze hummed and nodded, looking satisfied. "I think he looks perfect."

"Young Master Wen is so going to fall completely," Cangse Sanren agreed.

"As if he hasn't fallen already," Jiang Fengmian said.

Lan Qiren quickly cleared his throat and changed the topic. "Have we figured the route, Young Master Nie?"

Thanks to more information from Wen Ruoyu, they already discovered when and where the bride would be coming from. Since Sect Leader Wen did not want to make the wedding big - perhaps inside he still feared that Wen Ruohan would keep making a ruckus and embarrass more people - it was likely that there would be no large crowd following the bridal procession, which would make it easier.

"We did. There should be no problem ambushing the procession, though what happens after that is another matter," Nie Yizhou said. "Also, will you be okay entering alone? At most we can get Maiden Yu and Maiden Liang in as ladies-in-waiting, but to sneak in the rest of us would be hard."

Lan Qiren hummed as he suddenly thought of something. The Wei and the Jiang couples surely would pass down this story to their children, and the Nie Clan would spread this tale as if it was a folklore to the entirety of Qinghe. Lan Qiren should get ready with his own story of their shameful feats to make sure they would keep their mouths shut. He could not imagine having to be teased to the next generation.

"... I do have an idea."

They waited, hiding behind trees and bushes. Lan Qiren's heart kept pounding, even faster as he finally saw what they were all waiting for.

The bridal procession as expected was not as large and merry as a bridal procession for wealthy and big families would normally be. There were only several servants of the bride family and a couple of male cultivators from Qishan Wen escorting the bridal palanquin. They waited until the bridal procession entered the road isolated from other people and that was when they struck.

With six talented young cultivators, it did not take more than an incense stick of time to ambush them. Cangse Sanren already had her special talismans to knock out all the escorts, while Jiang Fengmian and Wei Changze quickly tied them up. Inside, the bride who likely heard the ruckus outside shrieked and attempted to scramble out, albeit to no avail as Yu Ziyuan single-handedly dragged her out from the palanquin.

"Aaah spare me, spare me please, I don't know, I really don't know anything!" The bride screamed.

Yu Ziyuan narrowed her eyes as she glanced at the bride in question, who was trembling with fear. Cangse Sanren frowned and pulled the veil off.

A young lady, who appeared to be no older than twenty, stared back at them with quivering eyes. Lan Qiren was stunned, for he did not expect to see the bride like this. He had never seen Wen Xu and Wen Chao's mother as she was said to dislike attention, but he had heard stories about her and was certain that the Madam Wen of his original timeline was not the same lady as this one. She was definitely not as young and delicate-looking as the lady, Lan Qiren remembered people describing her as being an intimidating figure at first sight. Though... this girl looked quite familiar as well.

"... Who are you?" He blurted out.

Wei Changze eyed him. "Is she not the one?"

Yu Ziyuan, Cangse Sanren, Jiang Fengmian, and Nie Yizhou seemed confused - for obvious reasons, since they could not possibly know who Wen Ruohan was supposed to marry in the future. Lan Qiren shook his head. "She's not the same lady I remem- *cough* , the one I'm aware of."

The little bride quickly knelt down in fear. "Please, please spare me! I didn't even want to get married... I was forced to be here!"

Lan Qiren gawked. "Hold on... what do you mean by that?"

The young lady bit her lower lips and trembled. "The... the engagement was originally not for me, but the lady I was serving... it changed to me at the very last minute because she eloped."

The group of young cultivators gawked. Elope?!

The young bride fiddled with her fingers, looking nervous. "She received a letter from her betrothed, stating that he will never love her for he prefers men, so she is welcomed to take any lover with her to live in the Nightless City as part of the procession. She felt insulted and... she refused to get married and left the house. Her family however can't bear to lose their face and not send a bride. My parents are indebted to her family and they promised to clear off our debt so long as I pretend to be a relative of theirs and get married instead."

Lan Qiren; "....."

What were the odds? Who sent the letter? Was that really Wen Ruohan's doing?

Seeing that they were still skeptical, the bride then quickly added, "She was already hesitant about the wedding before since Young Master Wen refused to attend the matchmaking and humiliated her, now she is absolutely livid."

Well, her words did make sense now. For a noble lady to be rejected twice by someone she had not even met, it must have been infuriating for her. Still, Lan Qiren couldn't help feeling suspicious.

"We have no time for this. If you're willing to break the engagement, good. Our Qinghe Nie will pay back the debt your family owes," Nie Yizhou said.

The lady's eyes lit up. "Really?"

Seeing that she was genuinely glad to leave, Lan Qiren nodded. "Go back to your family home. We'll compensate you."

With the deal settled, the girl thanked them and left, scurrying away. Nie Yizhou took the outer robes of the escorts to put them on the people they had hired to be the additional male servants, while the Qishan Wen cultivators were tied up to the tree and plastered with a special talisman to get them to sleep for the next few hours, to ensure that the group had enough time to reach Nightless City and fulfill their main objective. Yu Ziyuan began

working on applying more cosmetics on the rest of the group. For extra precautions, they put on veils to cover their faces.

That was right. Call him petty, but Lan Qiren had suggested for Jiang Fengmian, Wei Changze, and Nie Yizhou to also dress themselves as ladies-in-waiting in order to sneak in.

Jiang Fengmian seemed very embarrassed but remained silent as Yu Ziyuan hid a smirk while powdering his face and putting his hair up. Wei Changze on the other hand did not even complain and had even done his own makeup, except that his skills were just as good as Wei Wuxian's and Cangse Sanren had to redo it. There was no female dress that could fit Nie Yizhou, so he was the only one unable to infiltrate and would instead be waiting for them outside with medical supplies and a carriage ready in case an emergency were to occur.

Lan Qiren sat down in the palanquin and noticed the girl had accidentally left her fan inside. The design of the fan reminded him awfully of a certain someone.

“....” Hold on. No wonder she looked familiar.

She was the daughter of a minor noble family, whom Lan Qiren had met once, after she had grown up a bit more and left the big manor she had worked at before. He met her at the funeral of Nie Yizhou after he died, leaving the teenaged Nie Mingjue to take over the sect. She was in fact Nie Huaisang's mother, whom Nie Yizhou had married after the death of his first wife!

Lan Qiren shuddered thinking about all the different outcomes that occurred just from one change in event - of Wen Ruohan refusing to attend his first marriage meeting. His first fiancée, who was a prideful woman, refused to be married to someone who had already declined from meeting her and as a result, someone else was sent out to be the bride. If they didn't stop the bridal procession, instead of Wen Xu and Wen Chao, Nie Huaisang might possibly be born into Wen Clan!

Now that he thought about it, that letter couldn't possibly come from Wen Ruohan, who had been travelling all the time with Lan Qiren and was being closely monitored after his return to Qishan. Meaning, either someone else had sent the letter, or the girl was lying in order to spare herself. The only person who knew about his future bride however was Wen Ruohan himself and Wen Ruoyu, and Wen Ruoyu was initially not against the marriage.

It occurred to Lan Qiren that the girl, seeing him dressed in wedding attire, must have formed the conclusion that they had already planned to take over her place no matter her decision, so she instantly made up the story in order to gain sympathy and escape unscathed. Perhaps when the first bride candidate was already reluctant, she had in fact volunteered to take the place herself, trying to settle her family debt while also possibly elevating their status but now seeing another way to deal with the problem, she chose to cooperate.

... *Truly terrifying*, Lan Qiren thought.

Well, whether his theory was correct or not, that was something he would perhaps ask her one day in the future. For now, he needed to focus on their current mission - infiltrate the Nightless City and save Wen Ruohan.

Entering was easy, indeed. Qishan Wen was already expecting the arrival of the bride and all it took was for the two male servants to show their clan token to enter. Sect Leader Wen came to receive the guests himself.

"I hope the journey wasn't too taxing on you," he greeted her.

Lan Qiren took a deep breath before he spoke, making sure to change his voice to resemble a female. "Not at all."

Sect Leader Wen paused. He raised an eyebrow and glared at them. "... What's the meaning of this?" He questioned, his voice was cold.

Uh oh. Did he notice something was awry? Lan Qiren had made sure he would at least sound like a young maiden, he even practiced in front of the group earlier. Was it his figure? He was still seated in the palanquin, Sect Leader Wen couldn't have possibly seen the difference.

The male servant trembled. "The young miss is nervous and..."

"Speak the truth."

"That... the young miss fell ill and wasn't deemed fit to be a bride. Madam sent her relative instead," the male servant uttered. It was easier to fit in a half-truth, for the bride's family did in fact send in a substitute, except that the substitute bride had also been replaced.

Sect Leader Wen snorted. "Fell ill? It isn't because Ruohan didn't show up the first time, is it? She threw quite a fit last time, I'm surprised she is this meek."

Lan Qiren; "..."

"Whatever. Come in and proceed with the ceremony," Sect Leader Wen grunted.

He did not even mind that the bride had been switched. It seemed like he really never cared about who his daughter-in-law would be, as long as she was from a decent family. All he cared about was to have someone to sire his grandchildren and continue the Wen Clan bloodline.

The ceremonial hall was decorated lavishly, yet the guests in attendance were very small in number. Judging from the noises made by the footsteps and whispers, there were no more than one hundred people there, meaning only the closest clan members were invited - a very small number for a clan as big as Qishan Wen and for someone as important as the heir. Gusu Lan wasn't too big on celebrations so this amount of low noise level would not be unusual in Cloud Recesses, but Lan Qiren had been to weddings at Unclean Realm, Lotus Pier, and Koi Tower. Wei Wuxian would probably call this a funeral instead of a wedding, with how solemn the mood was.

Yu Ziyuan and Cangse Sanren guided him inside as his 'ladies-in-waiting'. They stopped and he felt the presence of someone in front of him, and halted his steps as well.

"Ruohan, take your bride's hand," Sect Leader Wen ordered.

Lan Qiren gulped. Wen Ruohan was standing right in front of him.

Making a ruckus early in the morning of course didn't work. Wen Ruohan sighed as he looked down at the red fabric on his body. If Lan Qiren was here, no doubt he would be vexed. How he wished he had thought through things earlier. It did not feel good, to break an important promise like this.

His bride had arrived and Wen Ruohan must admit, he was a little surprised. She was tall, very tall for a woman. Even her two attendants at the back were tall but they both were looking down at the ground like a pair of shy young maidens. He had never seen this relative of his before but his mother was a woman of an average size, so he did not expect that her relatives would be this tall and sturdy.

"Ruohan, take your bride's hand," his father ordered

Wen Ruohan sneered. "She has eyes and feet, she can walk on her own."

There was a moment of silence from the spectating guests, who were all probably too shocked by the way he treated the new bride. Honestly, Wen Ruohan couldn't blame them. If it wasn't because she was perhaps trying to spare her family's some face, he would have been kicked right in the face for how rude his remark was during a day considered extremely special in everyone's life. However, precisely because it was supposed to be Wen Ruohan's important day as well, that he was also feeling bitter that his bride was not someone he desired but someone he was forced upon.

Sect Leader Wen huffed. "Bring the red cloth."

A servant rushed with a red cloth, tying the bride's wrist with one end and Wen Ruohan's with the other. Wen Ruohan did not bother with the courtesy and proceeded to walk. His bride followed suite and promptly but very discreetly stepped on his foot hard as they walked side by side.

Seemed like she had quite the temper. Well, Wen Ruohan could not get mad at her for that small revenge, considering he had just humiliated her. Still, where did she get that energy? He swore if it wasn't because of his own pride and willpower he would have yowled from the pain. Was she trained in martial arts?

They bowed to the heavens and earth. They bowed to the ancestors at the family altar. As Wen Ruohan bowed down at his now spouse, his heart began to sink in guilt and grief. It

would have been nice if the one underneath the veil was Lan Qiren. Then he wouldn't have felt this remorseful.

Even if he intended to run away tonight, it did not change that he was now married to this person.

He should have performed the three bows with Lan Qiren, back then at Hudie Village. If A Lin was here he would be shaking his head and reprimanding him.

"To the wedding chambers," one elder of Qishan Wen instructed and Wen Ruohan swallowed hard.

The ceremony was done. They were now officially husband and wife. It left bitter feelings in Wen Ruohan, knowing he was married to someone else, regardless of how much he did not want to admit it.

He tried to remain calm by telling himself that it would be over soon. Now all the attending clan members would be in a festive mood. They would be occupied with the banquet and possibly drunk as well, making the escape easier. While everyone else was busy celebrating, Wen Ruohan could sneak out.

The ladies-in-waiting shut the door and silence filled the bedchamber. Wen Ruohan stood there awkwardly, staring at the small table bearing some food and the nuptial wine. He sighed and looked at his new bride, who had been quiet since the beginning.

"Listen. I know I've been harsh to you," Wen Ruohan began. "But the truth is, this marriage will never work."

His bride turned around to face him, though her face was still covered by the veil. Wen Ruohan noticed her hands were quite large for a woman too, albeit still fairly dainty and beautiful. They reminded him of Lan Qiren's hands. He had walked, slept, and woke up holding those hands many times, he could never imagine having to hold someone else's hands with the same amount of warmth and intimacy.

Wen Ruohan took a deep breath. "I'm in love with someone. It can never be anyone else but him."

His bride flinched. Understandable. Anyone would be enraged to have their newlywed spouse confess his undying love for someone else, even if it was an arranged marriage.

"My father's intention is to make you into nothing but a breeding tool. I apologize that I may tarnish your family's reputation, but I cannot imagine a life without my beloved," Wen Ruohan uttered, then slowly approached her. "I would rather not dishonour my love for him and touch anyone else. I also refuse to turn someone into yet another pawn of my father. We can either agree to pretend this marriage never happened and leave, or you may go back and inform your clan tomorrow of the humiliation you've suffered, because I'm leaving this clan forever."

Seeing that his bride was not responding, he extended his hand to knock her out.

However, his hand was instantly swatted away and Wen Ruohan blinked as his bride suddenly spun her body, turning to slap him right in the face before striking him with her palm. He choked and gasped as she leaped and pinned him to the ground. His eyes widened.

She had indeed caught him off guard, however no normal person should have been able to subdue him like this, unless they were also a skilled cultivator.

"What a fool."

Wen Ruohan's breath halted for a second. That voice. The hands pressed against his chest and shoulder.

In one swift movement he took off the red veil, revealing sharp eyes that stared back into his own. The absence of thin facial hair and the frown marring his face reminded Wen Ruohan of the first time they met, except that back then he was the one to have defeated him in their impromptu fight.

Really, how many times must this man surprise him?

Will he ever stop being amazed by this man?

Just when he thought he couldn't have fallen deeper. Just when he thought Lan Qiren couldn't look even more beautiful. Each time, he kept exceeding Wen Ruohan's expectations.

Wen Ruohan smiled.

"Each time... whenever I thought it would be the worst, the end for me... you turn it around and make it the best moments of my life."

Lan Qiren raised an eyebrow. "We haven't even drank a sip of wine and you're already drunk?"

Wen Ruohan shook his head. "And I'm glad neither of us are drunk."

Lan Qiren huffed. "Not a wise choice to make if we are going to escape this place."

Wen Ruohan chuckled. "A drunk RenRen would have been amusing too. I've confessed my feelings like a drunken man, aren't you going to reply?"

The other's pale face flushed red. He leaned down closer and bit his lips before grunting. "So you know how embarrassing you are."

Lan Qiren dipped his head down and Wen Ruohan closed his eyes to savour the moment as their lips melded together.

so... I know in different regions and different dynasties, wedding traditions may vary. I've read thru several articles and watched some videos but my brain fails to produce the actual image of how it works, so I made it vague and just based on what I've seen on dramas. I'm purposely leaving out a lot of things since it's not the focal point of this story, but please feel free to share some resources if you have any (^o^)/

Wedding night (NSFW)

Chapter Notes

I was going to post this on Monday, but it's Valentine's and I thought...well, why not post this on Valentine's?

Warning: NSFW

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

"This is possibly the dumbest thing I'm going to do," Wen Ruoyu murmured as he glanced around to make sure there was nobody who could be watching them.

"You're in this with us now. So what if it's dumb if it's the right thing to do?" Cangse Sanren whispered.

"What use is righteousness if it'll get us killed?" Wen Ruoyu lamented.

"Not fighting against this might also get us killed. If we are going to die, we should die with honour," said Wei Changze calmly.

"... How about not dying in the first place, A Ze? Let's be more positive, okay?" Cangse Sanren said. "We've got this planned, everyone is too busy to notice a couple of servants absent."

There was still music playing in the back accompanied by tablewares clinking and people chattering. While the banquet was still going on, Wen Ruoyu, Wei Changze, and Cangse Sanren had snuck out from the main hall to head to the dungeon, where the prisoners were usually kept. There were not as many guards since most of the clan members were celebrating the wedding and Wen Ruoyu himself was quite familiar with the layout as well as the secret routes.

"That's the place," Wen Ruoyu whispered, pointing at the dimly lit hallway, where at the end of the hallway stood a metal door guarded by one cultivator. "I'll go and distract him, you two can get in meanwhile. I trust you have the stealth of decent cultivators."

Cangse Sanren grinned. "We got this."

Wen Ruoyu approached the guard with a jug of wine, offering the man a drink. Luckily the man who apparently was quite salty about being left out from the celebration was way more than happy to accept a jug of wine and he did not feel the need to be wary against a clan member. While Wen Ruoyu was casually chatting with the guard - making sure to distract him with some juicy gossips - Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren maneuvered their way around and entered the dungeon.

The prison was mostly empty - as it normally should. Cultivation sects weren't exactly the public authority in charge of holding human prisoners, the only times they would need a prison for humans would be in the rare cases of crooked cultivators who could not be contained by normal human prisons, or for punishing severe crimes done by their own sect disciples.

They tiptoed their way in. It was eerily silent, save for the sound of water droplets hitting the damp ground, perhaps from a leaked wall or ceiling. Nothing but the moonlight from small windows with iron bars illuminated the space, very dimly that unless one was a well-trained hunter or cultivator, they wouldn't be able to see at all with how dark it was. Not to mention, the cold and murky air.

They reached the end of the dungeon space. The two youngsters nearly jumped as the sound of chains clinking startled them.

"Who is there?" A very hoarse voice spoke.

Cangse Sanren lit up a fire talisman and gasped.

A young man laid on the ground, with nothing but a single bloodied robe wrapping his thin body. There were dark circles around his eyes and his cheeks were slightly hollowed, while his shoulder bones and clavicles were prominent - a sign that he was malnourished. For a cultivator to be in this state - it could only mean that either they were still in the early stages where they had yet to be able to practice inedia or they had been kept a prisoner for too long and endured so much torture, that their golden core could no longer support their bodies without nourishment.

According to A Zhao, Zhao Wu was someone capable of fighting decently and he was able to escape a rampaging Xue Yanzi and the Yueyang Chang Sect while also protecting the other children. He may not be as strong as Bai Yiqing and the rest of them, but to be in this state just meant he really had suffered for way too long.

"Zhao Wu?" Wei Changze whispered.

Zhao Wu slowly opened his eyes with great difficulty. "...How... who are..."

"We are here to help you, don't worry," Cangse Sanren said as she worked on picking the lock.

"...W...why?"

"Your little sibling - Zhao Liu, is still alive and I'm sure he wants to see you," Wei Changze smiled.

Zhao Wu's eyes widened. "Xiao Liu... Xiao Liu is alive? Why... with you... two?"

"Young Master Wen Ruohan saved him. He knows about Wen Lin too."

Tears began to pool in Zhao Wu's eyes. "Is... is A Lin okay? Did he.... escape?"

The two paused. They could not possibly answer that honestly, not when Zhao Wu looked like he was already on the verge of death and was just hanging on life perhaps with the hope to be reunited with his beloved. How could they tell him that there was nothing left of Wen Lin but bones and a lingering soul so resentful that it had almost turned into a demon?

Wei Changze pursed his lips. "Wen Lin wouldn't want to see you like this. Let's get out of here first."

When Wen Ruohan suddenly confessed his feelings like that, Lan Qiren honestly was just so embarrassed he wanted to dig the ground and bury himself in like a carrot. What was he supposed to do when someone was confessing his love like this?! However, when the veil was taken off and he was able to see Wen Ruohan clearly, thoughts of scolding him flew over his mind. All he could think about was how good the other looked, dressed in red.

Lan Qiren had always been strict with himself. He had always believed in choosing only the righteous, safest, and pragmatic ways of doing things. Sneaking into another clan's territory by switching the bride was none of those. What he was doing was foolish and he knew he was being irrational. There were better ideas to stop the burning of Cloud Recesses, the deaths of innocent people in the future, the disaster caused by the Yin Iron. However, this wasn't him acting to prevent the calamities anymore. This was him just fulfilling his selfish desire to have Wen Ruohan for himself.

So when Wen Ruohan asked for a reply - a confirmation of mutual feelings that had long should have been given - Lan Qiren was unable to deny it. Since he was too shy to admit it by words, he simply leaned down for a long kiss, something he could never have done to someone he wouldn't vow to share a life with.

They finally parted from the kiss due to the lack of air. Lan Qiren wished he still had the veil on as he could feel his cheeks warming up from the embarrassment of knowing how he had just been kissed breathless.

Wen Ruohan cupped his face. "You keep taking my breath away with your beauty, RenRen."

Lan Qiren's face flushed and he looked away. "Don't be silly. Hurry up and take off your clothes."

Wen Ruohan's eyes lit up and he licked his lips. Oh, he wasn't expecting this at all but then again, Lan Qiren had already surprised him by actually swapping places with the bride. Without hesitation he began taking off his belt. "So impatient, RenRen. Well, if you say so..."

Lan Qiren huffed and tossed a qiankun pouch at him. "After that, put on these."

Wen Ruohan blinked and looked at the qiankun pouch with perplexed eyes. "... What?"

“Servants’ clothes that Young Master Wei and Maiden Liang wore last time. You can’t possibly think of running away in that striking red outfit, right?”

“... Oh,” Wen Ruohan sounded disappointed.

Lan Qiren glared at him as he looked for the partition screen to also change his clothes. “Are you thinking of something else?”

Wen Ruohan grinned as he shrugged off the outer layers of his outfit and went to embrace Lan Qiren from behind. “Well... isn’t this our wedding night, RenRen? Our first night?” He purred as his hands sneakily reached for the belt on Lan Qiren’s slim waist.

“This may also be our last night together if we don’t take the chance now,” Lan Qiren rolled his eyes.

“... Tskk,” Wen Ruohan clicked his tongue and let go. “Alright, for you RenRen, I’m going to endure it. Though it’s also you who’s giving me this *hard* time -”

“...Shameless!”

“So are we going to jump out from the window?”

“Where is your spiritual sword?” Lan Qiren asked.

“We’d have to look for it but it’s likely either in my father’s room or the armoury in another building,” said Wen Ruohan.

Lan Qiren nodded as he also took off the heavy layers of the red garments, leaving himself in only the inner garment. “Good. We’ll get out through the window, then retrieve your sword if possible. After that, we’re going to escape through the southeast gate, Young Master Nie will be waiting for us there.”

“As expected from RenRen, you’ve planned this well -”

There was an abrupt knock on the door. The two young men froze.

“You’re being awfully quiet, Wen Ruohan,” it was the voice of his younger brother, Wen Rongzhi, right outside the door.

Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes. “And what are you doing, disturbing a newlywed’s first night?”

“Father ordered me to watch over you, what else?”

Lan Qiren glanced at Wen Ruohan in panic. They had both counted on not being watched on the wedding night, they did not expect Sect Leader Wen to go this far. Wen Ruohan carefully pulled Lan Qiren to the large bed lined with red silk beddings and sweet-scented flower petals, then draped the blanket over his beloved in case someone were to suddenly barge into the room. “What kind of nonsense is that, to watch a newlywed couple on their first night?” He yelled back to the door.

“I’m not actually watching. Who wants to see their own brother doing that?” Wen Rongzhi snorted. “All I need is a proof that you two are actually consummating, yet I’m hearing nothing but whispers and feet stomping.”

Lan Qiren gawked. P-p-proof of consummation?! What in the world would that be? What did Sect Leader Wen want?!

“Ah, let me guess. I heard that your fiance got pissed off and ran away, so now you’re getting a substitute, right? Is she that ugly that you don’t want to spend the night with her?” Wen Rongzhi cackled.

Wen Ruohan glanced at Lan Qiren and smirked. “On the contrary, my bride is even more beautiful than I imagined. A little feisty, though, I tried touching their face and they tackled me to the ground.”

Wen Rongzhi made a disgruntled noise. “I don’t care how or what that bride of yours is like. As long as I can verify that you’ve done the deed, then I can spare myself from this.”

Wen Ruohan grimaced. “Disgusting.”

“Tell that to the old man,” Wen Rongzhi spat. “Lay a white cloth on the sheet and once you’re done with her, just bring me the proof.”

“Proof?”

“Her blood. Oh, and in case you try to cut yourself instead, father wants to have proof of your spill too.”

By now Lan Qiren was fuming and his face was red from anger as well as embarrassment. He glanced at Wen Ruohan, his palm already eager to look for his sword, that he had brought along hidden underneath his clothes earlier. If he did not come here, would that mean Wen Ruohan not only wouldn’t be able to escape, he would be forced to sleep with the woman anyway?

Wen Ruohan placed a finger against Lan Qiren’s lips. He looked around and his eyes twitched a little as he spotted the white cloth folded neatly on the side table. Here he thought the cloth was for the occupants of the room to clean themselves after a bath, but... who knew his father would be this devious. “Give me your sword and I can cut myself a bit, RenRen.”

“... And the s...spill?” Lan Qiren stammered a little.

A small tint of red bloomed in Wen Ruohan’s face. “Well, just looking at my beautiful bride tonight, I imagine it wouldn’t be too difficult to pleasure myself.”

“....”

“Are you going to do it or is your bride so ugly that you can’t get it up?” Wen Rongzhi’s voice raised impatiently from the other side.

“Stay there, RenRen,” Wen Ruohan whispered. He winked with a teasing smile as he began untying his inner robes as well. “Well... you can stay there and pretend to make some noise, or you can close your eyes.”

Lan Qiren held his breath as the older male laid the white cloth over the red bedsheet. There was a small bottle of herb and aromatic oil placed strategically at the bedside, perhaps to set the mood and to ‘help’ in case the bride wasn’t aroused enough for the intercourse to go smoother. Out of embarrassment Lan Qiren had automatically shut his eyes as Wen Ruohan parted open the last piece of clothes on his body to reveal his manhood.

Lan Qiren gulped as he could hear the sound of the bottle being popped open, the oil-coated fingers rubbing against skin, and Wen Ruohan’s brief gasp. With Wen Ruohan sitting right in front of him, it was hard for him to ignore the heat accumulating inside him.

“... You’re being silent, Wen Ruohan. Is your bride even alive in there?” Wen Rongzhi’s voice rang again from outside.

“You think anyone would have the face to make noise when they know someone is listening?!” Wen Ruohan yelled back, his voice slightly rough.

Lan Qiren bit his lips. It struck him that Wen Ruohan, albeit acting very flirty, was a virgin just like him. He wasn’t a promiscuous man like Jin Guangshan. He still wasn’t aware what intimacy was actually like, the sounds that would come out, the atmosphere it would create. Lan Qiren however, albeit never been touched, had been ‘exposed’ to those enough, thanks to his shameless nephew-in-law who had the tendency to be very loud and quite open about his married life.

He could not count the many times Wei Wuxian had cracked on dirty jokes or making remarks full of sexual innuendos. While Lan Sizhui would usually remain clueless, Lan Jingyi would slowly join in the laughter or start teasing Jin Rulan, who did not know exactly the meaning behind those jokes but was insightful enough to realize they were inappropriate and was quick to berate both his uncle and his friend.

Lan Qiren dared himself to open his eyes and reached out to hold Wen Ruohan’s wrist. Wen Ruohan’s eyes grew wide and he stopped, perhaps he was not expecting the bold action from Lan Qiren. Lan Qiren bit his lower lip. They were in this together. It was technically their wedding night, even if neither of them were actually anticipating or prepared for this. He certainly wasn’t, he was more ready to clash swords than to... well, do this.

His eyes moved slowly, drinking in the sight - from Wen Ruohan’s flushed face to his prominent Adam’s apple, broad chest that was moving up and down with each breath, beautifully sculpted abdominal muscles, as well as the hard, bulging manhood in his hand, slick with oil. Lan Qiren swallowed hard. The first thing that occupied his mind was the enormous size of the erection, that was perhaps slightly bigger than his own.

Lan Qiren however threw away stray thoughts and began taking off his own clothes. He was no expert in this matter seeing that he had no personal experience but he had heard things that should not be heard ever since Wei Wuxian made Jingshi his home. He had also stumbled

upon materials confiscated from a few disciples. Wen Ruohan dropped his jaw as Lan Qiren thickened his face and laid down with his inner robe parted and his bare skin exposed.

“Ren... RenRen...?” Wen Ruohan choked.

“We are not... doing it to the end. I need my body to be fully functional tonight,” Lan Qiren uttered, turning his face away to hide the crimson shades on his cheeks. “But... maybe... if you just do it in between... it will be almost close to the real one.”

“... Are you sure?”

“Stop asking questions. Weren’t you the one who was so eager before?” Lan Qiren uttered.

A small smile appeared on Wen Ruohan’s face and he leaned down to press his lips against Lan Qiren’s face. “I’m sorry our first night has to be like this. We’ll make it up soon, a hundredfold, a thousandfold, I promise.”

Lan Qiren did not get to answer, as Wen Ruohan had sealed his words with a long searing kiss, prodding his tongue inside the warm cavern of his mouth. His warm, oil-coated palm rubbed against Lan Qiren’s chest, eliciting a weird sensation that made him unconsciously arch his back. His other hand meanwhile gently trailed a path across the smooth expanse of Lan Qiren’s skin, from his shoulder down to his ribs, belly, waist, and hips.

Lan Qiren was already so embarrassed he felt as if his chest was close to exploding with how erratic his heartbeat now was. Should he turn around so he did not have to look at Wen Ruohan’s face? No, that meant exposing his behind and that place completely, that was even more embarrassing. However, even in his current position he was already exposing himself ah...

Lan Qiren did not have the chance to think further, as warm, slicked hands suddenly enveloped his half-hard member.

“Mm!” His pale hands quickly flew to his mouth to stop the moans from escaping as Wen Ruohan began stroking him. Nobody had ever seen, let alone touched that part of him. To suddenly be engaged in such intimacy was something so foreign and to have someone he was deeply attracted to doing it lit up a fire inside him. His legs trembled and it did not take long for him to become completely aroused. “Hh... hurry... don’t... waste your time on me....”

“Intimacy is supposed to be enjoyed by both parties, RenRen,” Wen Ruohan leaned down to lightly bite his ear and whispered. He positioned himself right in between Lan Qiren’s legs, then carefully lifted the long, pale legs, placing them over his broad shoulder for better access. “Close your thighs tight, RenRen.”

Lan Qiren pressed his palms against his mouth once more the moment he felt the thick bulging rod slipping in between his thighs, grazing and teasing against his perineum and the hilt of his manhood. Wen Ruohan began moving, raising the lower half of Lan Qiren’s body up while rolling his hips in a slow but steady motion. The sound of oiled fingers rubbing against skin was now replaced with the lewd sounds of flesh slapping against another.

Wen Ruohan smirked. "You have no idea how much I'm holding back, RenRen. Once we escape this, I'm going to search for ways to make love between men."

Lan Qiren choked as his mind began imagining the slick pillar entering his chrysanthemum, instead of just sliding in and out between his thighs. Wen Ruohan's sweaty palm landed on the side of his waist and Lan Qiren inadvertently started picturing a bulge on his flat belly from the manhood hitting deep inside him. Wen Ruohan moved his hand back to pumping his own erection and as precum leaked out, Lan Qiren wondered how it would feel like to have Wen Ruohan's seeds filling him instead.

Will it feel even better than this?

While various thoughts were popping into his head, Wen Ruohan had sped up and was nearing climax. "I need... can you put your legs closer, RenRen?"

Alright, he could not stand this. This was too much for his heart. Lan Qiren's legs were shaky not from fatigue but from the adrenaline rush. He dropped his legs from Wen Ruohan's shoulder and turned to flip his body around. "H... hurry... I can't..."

He could not keep a sane mind any longer. Anymore stimulation and he might actually be tempted to demand for them to go all the way tonight. Being on all fours was a new experience for him but it wasn't like everything else was something he had done either.

He held his breath as Wen Ruohan also shifted his position slightly, then gasped a little when the pillar once more slipped in between his thighs. Wen Ruohan's left hand gripped tightly on his hip as he thrust in full fervour while his right hand playfully grabbed onto and pinched his nipple. Placing themselves in this position, their manhoods also started rubbing against each other. The stimulation proved to be too much for Lan Qiren and he grabbed the pillow to bury his face and his moans.

"RenRen... Lan Qiren...ahh, Young Master Lan..." Wen Ruohan panted, then leaned down to whisper right at his ear, "Husband."

A choked up moan escaped Lan Qiren and warm fluid splattered onto the white cloth. Wen Ruohan grunted and spilled his own seeds as well. Lan Qiren inhaled, then froze when he felt warm liquid suddenly landing on his rear, slowly dripping into the crevice of that 'place'.

"Ah... oh, sorry RenRen, more came out than I thought," Wen Ruohan said.

He definitely did that on purpose, Lan Qiren thought and slowly sat up. His hand wandered to the place that was hit by Wen Ruohan's load and he unconsciously rubbed it as if to question himself whether that was really the thing he thought it was - unaware that Wen Ruohan was watching him with a glint in his eyes.

We did it, Lan Qiren thought, face completely red. Not to the end but that was the most intimate they had been. Seeing their stains mixing together on the white cloth gave him a strange, thrilling feel. It was enthralling but at the same time also appalling when he thought of the reason why they had to have the white cloth there. Oh, now that he was reminded of this white cloth, they still needed to stain it with blood.

Lan Qiren unsheathed his sword with the intention to make a small cut on his arm but Wen Ruohan quickly took the sword from him and lightly cut the tip of his finger instead before Lan Qiren could even object. He winked at him. "Alright, RenRen should lay down like an exhausted, poor bride while I go and show this to the wretched guy."

Pursing his lips, Lan Qiren laid down and covered himself with the blanket, making sure that his face would not be revealed.

Wen Ruohan quickly put on his inner robe before walking over to the door and glaring at his brother. He tossed the white cloth to Wen Rongzhi, who had a disgusted expression on his face. "There you go, my unborn children are there."

"Gross!" Wen Rongzhi spat and barely held the cloth, pinching the end with only the tip of his fingers as if to avoid touching it as much as possible.

Wen Ruohan rolled his eyes. "You asked for it."

"For someone who didn't want to get married you sure had no problem fucking her. What happened to not making her a breeding tool?" Wen Rongzhi sneered.

"Tossed to the window, just like yours and father's logic," Wen Ruohan answered. Only then did he notice that it wasn't just Wen Rongzhi, there were several other Wen elders also there, albeit they were standing farther than Wen Rongzhi. He felt repulsed. His father really put out a lot of effort to ruin his days and nights, huh.

Wen Rongzhi made an ugly face. "Father isn't feeling well, thanks to you giving him headaches. You better remain here tonight and don't make trouble anymore, we barely have enough people to guard the place with so many of them drunk. You can get your sword back in the armoury at the east wing tomorrow morning," he said, then turned to the other elders. "It's done. Let's go."

With that, Wen Rongzhi left, followed by all the Wen elders.

Wen Ruohan blinked. He slowly stepped back then closed the doors.

Did he... did his brother just give him some hints to escape and to retrieve his sword? Also, for Wen Rongzhi, his younger and unmarried brother to be the one monitoring the consummation instead of the elders... was it also his plan?

Huh. Either Wen Rongzhi wanted to try his luck and take his position by giving him the means to leave the sect or he was in fact secretly supporting him.

This really turned out into a night with many surprises for him.

So...it wasn't outright a juicy steak, but still a hamburger, I guess lol. Hope you enjoyed the meat 🤤

Maybe they'll have another, better session where they can enjoy it to their heart's content soon, after everything is over, hohoho

A very brief break

Chapter Notes

I'm late again... my brain has been invaded by some brrrrr moments

There weren't as many guests at the banquet which meant less people to deal with if they were to have a fight, however less people also meant it was more noticeable if four people suddenly went missing. While Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze had gone to search for Zhao Wu, Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian had carefully made their way to the banquet table as well as the alcohol supplies to mix in a little special powder procured from Wen Ruoyu into the food and drink. It wasn't anything harmful, it was just something to ensure the guests would remain drunk for a longer duration.

With everyone around them mostly inebriated, it was easier to slip out. Yu Ziyuan glanced at the sky. It was about time for her and Jiang Fengmian to escape as planned. A couple of drunk men came to flirt with them and she gave them a death glare that quickly shushed them away. Luckily nobody seemed to pay much attention to whoever was coming in and out of the banquet hall at this point, either they were enjoying themselves too much to care or they had figured the two 'young ladies-in-waiting' did not want to be disturbed by drunkards anymore.

"Stop acting like a shy maiden, Young Master Jiang," Yu Ziyuan rolled her eyes. "Aren't you too much into your character?"

Seeing an embarrassed Jiang Fengmian acting like a real shy young maiden was actually quite amusing. He was very gentle to begin with and hence made a very convincing lady-in-waiting, that more people actually came to hit on him than Yu Ziyuan. It actually made her feel like she had to protect a white lotus meimei. Being in a sect full of mostly fierce, strong-headed female cultivators, Yu Ziyuan was not used to having to shield a shy white lotus maiden, her martial sisters more often could take care of themselves.

Jiang Fengmian furrowed his brows. "Won't people know if I raise my head?"

"You're in a veil and I've put on enough powder on you that even a courtesan would be jealous. Now let's move, everything must be done according to the plan," Yu Ziyuan hushed.

They snuck out from the banquet hall and made their way out though the mountainous hunting ground. Normally unless people were actually hunting for something - either demons or wild animals - they would not use this path, for it was too dangerous especially at night. However, it was precisely because nobody would be going there, that it was a safe spot for them to reconvene.

They were the first to arrive. Nie Yizhou was waiting with a carriage and horses. He raised an eyebrow when he only saw the two of them there. “Only the two of you?”

“Changze and Maiden Liang are looking for Zhao Wu,” Jiang Fengmian explained while taking off the veil and using the cloth to rub off the cosmetics from his face. “We’ve looked around while escaping. There should be no problem with the route that we planned.”

Nie Yizhou grunted. His hand was itching to reach for his saber. “Should we go and check it out?”

“Let’s stick to our original plan and wait for two more incense sticks of time,” Jiang Fengmian said.

Yu Ziyuan nodded in agreement. “If we rush in there, we might actually reveal ourselves instead and everything will be ruined.”

“I’m so sick of waiting,” Nie Yizhou complained.

Jiang Fengmian chuckled. “Sometimes waiting is also part of the battle.”

Sure enough, just right before it reached two incense sticks, they finally saw the figure of Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren approaching them with speedy yet light, quiet steps. Wei Changze was carrying an unconscious young man on his back with Cangse Sanren trailing behind and looking out for any possible threat.

“Medicine,” Wei Changze urged as soon as they arrived at the carriage, carefully placing the young man inside while Cangse Sanren carefully placed a cushion under his head.

“Is this Zhao Wu?” Nie Yizhou asked, looking at the person in disbelief. He looked more like a poor overworked civilian than a cultivator with decent talent.

“This is terrible,” Yu Ziyuan uttered. “What have they done to him?”

“Questions later. He... he doesn’t know what happened to... that person yet,” Cangse Sanren said, biting her lips as she could not help feeling devastated as well. “What about those two?”

Jiang Fengmian shook his head. Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan had yet to be seen and they had very limited time left before someone would eventually notice that something was off.

Bai Yiqing couldn't recall when was the last time that she had woken up from a good night sleep. It was sort of a weird feeling, realising that she had actually slept through the night, undisturbed and without any nightmares nor worry. For months she had only been catching small naps to replenish her energy before she continued moving to keep looking for... what she thought was Young Master Chang.

She had already known that her master wasn't exactly the prime example of a righteous cultivator. However, he did save her and Xue Yanzi from the streets, giving them new lives after they had lost their parents. He saw their potential and taught them survival skills, even took them as disciples. She had grown up with Xue Yanzi, pampering him like a little brother. He wasn't the most ideal parent figure but to her, he was righteous in his own way. When Master Zhao talked about settling down in a permanent residence and creating their own sect with no regards to lineage, Bai Yiqing thought it was a dream come true.

She had always loved children, even dreaming of having her own in the future. They met Young Master Chang and while Xue Yanzi voiced some doubts, Bai Yiqing held on to the hopes and insisted on keeping the group together. When she found her master gone, her dearest brother dead - she thought they had been betrayed by Young Master Chang. She thought she would not find peace until she could avenge her master and martial brother.

Who knew everything - all those innocent people who were attacked - all of them were the result of her master's unorthodox work? That it was the spirit of her beloved shidi who had slain all those people?

As she opened her eyes and took in a deep breath of fresh air, she recognised the smell of incense lingering in the room, as well as the morning dew. There was a faint sound of a flute coming from the front. Bai Yiqing slowly put on an additional layer of robe and tied her hair, before stepping outside to the veranda.

Instantly her eyes widened as she took in the sight of blue gentian flowers blooming at the yard, previously filled with nothing but trimmed grass. Amongst the flowers, Qingheng Jun stood there blowing his flute, looking like the perfect image of a beautiful cultivator.

He noticed her presence and stopped playing. "You've woken up...." He paused, his eyes widened as if he had just seen something that stunned him.

Bai Yiqing realized that perhaps it was his first time seeing her without her veil. During the entire time they traveled together she had been wearing a veil except when going to bed, and they had always slept separately - either separated by walls of partition screens. "These flowers...?"

"Ah.... yes, I brought them here, thinking it would make this place look better at least," Qingheng Jun said sheepishly. "There's only a small patch now, but I've got some seedlings waiting to be planted."

"Ah... I see..." Bai Yiqing uttered, unsure of what to say.

Her first impression of Qingheng Jun was that perhaps, he was a little weird. Someone very righteous, someone strong, but also quite odd. She could not understand why he chose to help her. Bai Yiqing had encountered several cultivators from smaller sects before but none had put as much effort as Qingheng Jun did.

He was also very handsome, Bai Yiqing could not deny that.

More importantly, he had stayed by her side and insisted on not letting her leave until she was healed. Bai Yiqing wondered if he really wanted her to stay forever, for she could not be certain how long it would take her to get over the grief of losing her most important people. Had she not been here, surrounded by people and being constantly cared for by Qingheng Jun, she had no idea what could have happened. What she could have done to herself.

“Maiden Bai, I...” Qingheng Jun paused. “I apologize for my rashness the other day. Asking to take you as my wife, when you were in a vulnerable state - that was not right.”

Bai Yiqing shook her head. “You were trying to save me.”

“There were other things I could have done to save you, as Qiren said. Moreover... that, just wasn’t right,” Qingheng Jun sighed.

Bai Yiqing chuckled. “Sect Leader Lan really should be more careful with his words. Proposing marriage to a woman of no remarkable lineage, no family, no property - moreover, with a terrible history.”

“That’s not true!” Qingheng Jun quickly denied. “Maiden Bai, you are worth more than any noble blood, wealth, more than anything. You are someone who would teach and play with young, abandoned orphans. You are someone who would spend months travelling without barely any rest to uphold justice. You value your beloved ones more than anything.”

She smiled bitterly. “And this is why... I’m in this predicament. If only I-”

Her voice was stuck, she was unable to think of more words to say.

“Master Zhao made his decision to keep researching the technique. Xue Yanzi chose to keep the secret between the two of them. My uncle chose to contain the spirit using his own body. I can’t tell you to forget your grief, for that is something nobody can control,” said Qingheng Jun. “However, I just want you to know... that this is not your fault. It was never your fault.”

Bai Yiqing pursed her lips.

“Take as much time as you wish, Maiden Bai. I’m a poor talker, but I will always be ready to listen,” Qingheng Jun said. “Also... I did not get to tell you this, but you haven’t lost everything. A Zhao... one of the children, Zhao Liu is here.”

Bai Yiqing’s eyes widened. “Xiao Liu... he’s here? He’s safe?”

Qingheng Jun smiled and nodded. “According to what Qiren told me, during the whole chaos Zhao Wu managed to run with a bunch of the kids you taught. Qiren and Young Master Wen managed to retrieve Zhao Liu.”

Bai Yiqing gasped. She jumped from the deck and lunged at Qingheng Jun. “Where? Where is he?!”

A light pink shade appeared on Qingheng Jun’s face and he looked away. “Before we go and see him... perhaps you ought to get dressed properly...”

Bai Yiqing blinked, and only then remembered she was still in her sleepwear, covered with only one more layer. It was not something unusual for her, who was used to having limited things to wear but to the prim and proper Gusu Lan Sect, an unmarried woman touching an unmarried man while dressed in not enough layers to be considered 'being properly dressed' was perhaps too scandalous. She laughed a little. "I suppose Young Master Lan isn't that pure of a man either, it looks like you do have another intention when you proposed to me."

Qingheng Jun's face turned beet red. "That... it wasn't the only reason..."

"Wasn't the only reason? So it is part of the reasons."

Qingheng Jun choked up but decided to let it go upon seeing the smile on Bai Yiqing's face. If she was able to smile and tease him like this, she had gained part of her energy back and all he wished back was for her to get better. "I'll wait here."

Bai Yiqing nodded and went back inside. Qingheng Jun continued playing his flute, hoping the music might be able to help the flowers to grow beautifully.

The meeting had been concluded and the elders had finally reached an agreement. Thanks to Lan Qiren testifying and reporting the entire event - including relaying back Lan Fan's words to all the elders, Bai Yiqing was deemed innocent and was not to be punished. However, they were still against Qingheng Jun's decision to take her as his wife. It would take a lot more persuasion to do that, however Qingheng Jun was not in a rush to make them change their mind.

After all, before getting their permission, receiving Bai Yiqing's agreement should be the priority. As much as he desperately wanted to keep her by his side, he also did not want her to be unhappy. He did not want her to stay out of guilt or gratitude. Fostering genuine feelings after everything that had happened was not going to be an easy task, but Qingheng Jun knew that the effort and patience would be worth it.

I can't believe I'm learning about this from Qiren, Qingheng Jun thought. Speaking of Lan Qiren, he wondered how his brother was doing. Lan Qiren had changed a lot after meeting Wen Ruohan. He was always a loner who never bothered to make friends before, now he had a group of young clan heirs together with him, going on a special mission to save his 'not-lover'. Qingheng Jun kept hearing Lan Fan murmuring about how his cabbage was being stolen whenever he visited the elder man to play Cleansing.

Qingheng Jun scowled. *Qiren should know better than to just elope, right? I would be so disappointed if I can't plan his wedding.*

"I'm ready, Sect Leader Lan," Bai Yiqing called, emerging from the house.

They left the gentian house, with Qingheng Jun leading the way to the dormitory. However, the sound of approaching heavy footsteps unlike the normal Gusu Lan disciples stopped them. It was followed by a familiar voice calling for healers.

"Qiren? Is Qiren back?" Qingheng Jun thought out loud.

“They’re calling for healers. Let’s go to them first,” Bai Yiqing suggested.

Sneaking around the armory and fleeing Nightless City brought back memories of the war to Lan Qiren. He was a couple decades older back then, with more battle experience but a health that had slightly deteriorated thanks to accumulated stress. He had just lost his brother and nearly lost his nephews, his home was burned. As much as it took a lot from him, it also gave him the motivation to fight.

This time, he had his experience, with his young body in his prime. His brother was alive, his sister-in-law was alive, his peers were alive. The person whom he thought would be his future enemy was now his motivation to keep going.

They managed to make their way to the armory undetected. It appeared that most of the disciples in charge of making the rounds had stolen some alcohol and snacks from the kitchen and were also intoxicated. The armory was normally guarded with a special charm but Wen Ruohan noticed it was unlocked. A small part of him worried that it may be a trap but either way, he still needed his sword to survive from hereon, and he could only hope that Wen Rongzhi had been the one to undo the charms.

Wen Ruohan was tempted to find the Yin Iron and the notes that were taken from him. However, they were running out of time and he knew better than to be greedy now. Sect Leader Wen could change his mind and check on his room anytime soon. He wasn’t ashamed to order his second son and the elders to stand outside the room to ensure the marriage was consummated, Wen Ruohan doubted the man would have the decency to not barge into his room as he liked even with a newlywed bride inside.

“Let’s go,” Lan Qiren urged him.

Wen Ruohan exhaled. “Alright.” He would figure out how to stop his father later.

There was a secret tunnel known only to the direct descendants of Wen Clan. However, ironically the secret tunnel would perhaps be the most dangerous route for Wen Ruohan to take now, as it was a location where his possible unfortunate fate may remain unknown to the world. Dressed in servants' garments, Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren instead left Nightless City through the back entrance where only the lowest of servants - those in charge of cleaning the horse manures and lavatories would go through.

The moment they stepped out of the Qishan Wen Sect’s grounds, it felt like a breath of fresh air - figuratively of course, as the air surrounding them was more contaminated with the smell of animal dung. Still, Wen Ruohan giggled as he took Lan Qiren’s hand and ran, maneuvering their way through the heavy forest. They had nothing but the faint moonlight and their trained eyesight to guide them in the darkness.

“Where are they waiting, RenRen?” Wen Ruohan asked.

Lan Qiren frowned. He glanced at the sky and sighed. "It should be here but seems like we're late. They've left."

"How do you know?"

"The ground is a little dented, from the carriage that has been sitting in the same spot for a while. Looks like they did try to cover their tracks but they likely did not have enough time to do it properly," said Lan Qiren, feeling the ground with his fingers. It was a decent job of erasing the trail, if it wasn't because he already knew that they were supposed to regroup here he wouldn't have noticed the slight dent, especially in the dark. "We already decided that regardless of whether or not the plan succeeds, we would leave on time. Someone ought to be waiting at the inn to confirm that we've made it out, though."

Wen Ruohan nodded. "Let's not waste our time, then."

They had already retrieved Wen Ruohan's sword, but flying at that point would still be risky as anyone on night rounds may be able to see them if they were to fly. Lan Qiren and Wen Ruohan had no choice but to keep running. They encountered several spiritual beasts on the way and Wen Ruohan was glad he had chosen to get his sword back, otherwise Lan Qiren would be left fighting the beasts alone.

By the time they reached the town, it was well past midnight. Fortunately Nie Yizhou indeed was waiting for the two at the inn. He seemed relieved to find Wen Ruohan standing and looking well. "Thank goodness, I was almost losing my patience and was about to storm Nightless City searching for the two of you."

"That would not be a wise decision, Young Master Nie," Lan Qiren winced.

"Well, you two were late! What were you doing?"

What were they doing...

Lan Qiren's face turned scarlet as he recalled the reason for their delay. It was only a mere few hours ago, when Wen Ruohan's manhood was rubbing against his thighs. Thankfully, Wen Ruohan decided to spare Gusu Lan's second young master and asked, "Where are the others?"

Nie Yizhou's face darkened. "They've gone ahead, since we couldn't wait any longer. They found Zhao Wu in the dungeon and he's not in a good condition."

With Nightless City finally out of view, the three cultivators were able to fly on their swords to Gusu. On the way, Nie Yizhou explained about Zhao Wu's condition when Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze had found him. Wen Ruohan appeared visibly disturbed and his expression distorted even more upon hearing that Zhao Wu was asking about Wen Lin.

"We should figure out a counterplan soon," said Wen Ruohan. "The heir and his bride, as well as a prisoner disappeared overnight. No doubt Qishan Wen won't stay silent."

“They don’t know our involvement, though. We might have some time until Sect Leader Wen figures it,” Nie Yizhou said.

“He isn’t a fool, that man. He will find his way,” Wen Ruohan uttered, dread now suddenly settling as he was picturing the consequences.

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. “You’re not alone.”

Wen Ruohan laughed bitterly. “That’s what concerns me the most, RenRen. I’m not alone.”

“Your father is just one man. You have the support of three clan heirs. You are your own person and I know you will have support even within your own clan,” Lan Qiren said.

“He has that secret weapon in his arsenal,” Wen Ruohan said.

Lan Qiren narrowed his eyes. “True, but you forgot that he can’t use it yet.”

When Wen Ruohan in his original timeline retrieved the first Yin Iron piece, Wen Qing and her little brother were still young children. Yet, the first living corpses appeared only after Wen Qing was an adult, as it took him years to learn how to manipulate it. Lan Qiren was not quite sure how long Sect Leader Wen had possessed the Yin Iron piece, but the fact that he had yet to discover how to look for the other pieces meant it was highly possible that Sect Leader Wen himself still had very limited knowledge on how to utilize it.

“... Well, let’s just hope he’s not going to learn anything new within these couple days,” Wen Ruohan sighed.

By dawn, they were finally able to catch up with the carriage that had now reached Caiyi Town. Cangse Sanren was overjoyed to see all three of them and Wei Changze looked relieved as well. Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan both seemed exhausted, as they had taken turns driving the carriage all night. Halfway they had taken a break to let the poor horses rest but the young cultivators could not let their guard down as they were now carrying an escaped prisoner of a major cultivation sect with them.

The path to Cloud Recesses was quite bumpy and not too suitable for a horse carriage carrying an ill patient. Nie Yizhou carried Zhao Wu on his back, impressing everyone with his strength. He had just flown overnight on his sabre yet still had the strength to carry a man all the way up and did not even look tired.

Entering Cloud Recesses, Cangse Sanren did not waste a second shouting and asking for a healer. Lan Qiren’s natural instinct was to remind her that making excessive noise was against the rules, but decided to shut his mouth. Right now Zhao Wu’s health should take priority over the rules. Soon several elders and senior disciples who were visibly upset by the noise emerged and began scolding the young disciples. Half of them however immediately changed their minds the moment they saw Zhao Wu and rushed to help Nie Yizhou bring the poor young man to the infirmary.

“Qiren? Are you back, Qiren?” Qingheng Jun appeared, and Lan Qiren was pleasantly surprised to see Bai Yiqing was together with him.

He nodded. "We found him. Zhao Wu."

Bai Yiqing's eyes widened. Her eyes darted upon the figure being carried on Nie Yizhou's back and she rushed to follow him without a word.

Several disciples also trailed after the group out of curiosity to the infirmary, only to be lectured and shooed away by the elder who had volunteered to help Zhao Wu. Wei Changze had already helped patch up some of the wounds on Zhao Wu's body but a mere few hours could not heal the scars and bruises formed over the course of possibly several days or weeks. Bai Yiqing cupped her mouth to stop herself from sobbing uncomfortably.

She never thought she would be able to see them again. After the whole group was separated, she was convinced she had lost everyone forever. Turning to Lan Qiren and the other young cultivators, she dropped to her knees and prostrated, startling them. "Thank... thank you so much for saving him, young masters!"

Lan Qiren quickly bent down to stop her from kneeling. "There's no need to thank us, Maiden Bai."

Wen Ruohan nodded. "In fact... I should apologize to you. Zhao Wu ended up in this state partly because of my family," he said.

Qingheng Jun frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Zhao Wu went to Qishan and broke into Nightless City to look for Wen Lin. That's where we found him," Lan Qiren answered.

"... Who is Wen Lin?"

Pointing at Zhao Wu and then himself, Wen Ruohan answered, "His husband and my brother."

"...." Bai Yiqing blinked. "Husband? Husband?! Xiao Wu is married? When? How?"

"At Hudie Village, after escaping the pursuers from Yueyang Chang," Lan Qiren replied.

"Where... where is his husband then?" Bai Yiqing gawked, still unable to believe that one of the youths she used to teach was now actually married. Sure, Zhao Wu was grown up now, but ah... perhaps as a teacher and a big sister, in her eyes he still looked like a child.

Wen Ruohan's face turned grim. He clenched his fists. "He's gone. He was killed in Huanying Village, likely after parting ways with Zhao Wu."

Bai Yiqing paled. ".... Oh. Does... does Xiao Wu..."

Wei Changze shook his head. "He doesn't know. It's best if we don't tell him about this yet. Considering what happened to Wen Lin..."

Qingheng Jun scowled. "Qiren, is it the case of the doppelganger spirit?"

Lan Qiren nodded grimly. "He was already buried, but... I doubt Zhao Wu would be able to keep his calm if he were to find out the manners of how his spouse was unjustly killed and the way his body was dumped to hide the evidence," he said. Glancing at Wen Ruohan, he then hesitantly asked, "Xiongzhang... I know I've made the rash and selfish decision to bring Wen Ruohan here and save Zhao Wu but how should we proceed from now?"

Qingheng Jun chuckled and crossed his arms. "Really, it is quite unlike you. What were you thinking when you asked for my permission to leave that day?"

"I..." Lan Qiren paused. "I just wanted to bring him back to Cloud Recesses and protect him..."

His voice trailed off. Unknown to him, he was being observed with keen eyes by the people surrounding him, particularly Wei Changze, who was very invested in the development of the couple's relationship. Lan Qiren however now could only think of how embarrassing his words were. He could not help wondering if at one point, his younger nephew might have also uttered the same words to Lan Xichen when asked about Wei Wuxian, ever since the latter was painted as the enemy of the cultivation world.

Qingheng Jun curved out a knowing smile, a smile that would be passed down to his eldest son in the future. "I see. Xiongzhang will honor your wish. We will ensure everyone's safety here, though I would love to hear more details and explanation later. For now, all you look tired and should get some rest."

Lan Qiren plopped his body onto his bed and closed his eyes. Normally his daily routine was to sleep at nine and rise at five but on rare occasions, he would take a long nap during the day to compensate for any loss of sleep. It had been a long tough journey, with only a short break in between, and things were far from over.

He was just about to doze off when he felt the bed sinking a little and movements before him. A warm hand caressed his face and Lan Qiren opened his eyes. "... This is not where you were supposed to sleep."

Wen Ruohan pouted. "Should my bed not be where my husband is?"

Rose tint coloured Lan Qiren's ears. He had yet to tell Qingheng Jun or the elders about how he actually retrieved Wen Ruohan from Nightless City. He wondered if Qingheng Jun would get mad. What about the elders? "Our marriage... isn't completely official. We haven't exchanged gifts."

"I got you a son and you got me a pinwheel toy that our son can use," Wen Ruohan grinned.

"A Zhao is not an object."

“But he is a gift.”

“The pinwheel I bought was cheap and it wasn’t for you, so it doesn’t count.”

“RenRen, we performed the three bows and even consummated our marriage,” Wen Ruohan purred.

Lan Qiren blushed. “There... there was no... p-penetration.” Damn it, why did he have to say that? Now it sounded like he was not satisfied and desired more. Perhaps he did fantasize it for a moment, but to say his thoughts out loud was embarrassing.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. “Hmm? RenRen, you seem to know a lot more than I expect. Where did you learn, Second Young Master?”

Lan Qiren spluttered. “Shameless! Just go to sleep!”

Wen Ruohan laughed, pulling Lan Qiren closer to a tight embrace and pressing his lips on the top of his head. “Thank you, RenRen. What a mess I would be, without you.”

Lan Qiren bit his lower lip and wrapped his arms around the other, burying his face against Wen Ruohan’s chest to hide his burning cheeks. “Idiot.”

Fatigue took over them and they eventually fell asleep. Yet, only several hours later, they were both rudely awakened by loud noises from outside.

Lan Qiren grunted and rubbed his eyes. He glanced to the window and noticed that the sky was turning dark and the sun was about to set. Who would make such ruckus? Puzzled, he got up from the bed, ignoring Wen Ruohan’s tiny whine of protest, and opened the door to see several disciples running around. “What happened here?”

“Second Young Master!” One of the disciples halted, his expression filled with panic. “It’s... it’s Qishan Wen! They’re here with an army of cultivators!”

This man is my husband

Chapter Notes

If you notice I'm finally putting chapter titles, because... I find myself having to go back to past chapters to check back things I've written and it's hard when the chapters aren't titled T-T

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Qishan Wen was here.

Lan Qiren paled as he recalled memories of that day, when Wen Xu showed up to attack Cloud Recesses, killing so many disciples, hurting Xichen, hurting Wangji. The day his home was burned to the ground, and Xiongzhong was killed. So many elders perished. Lan Qiren himself was barely able to escape thanks to Xichen and Wangji vehemently protecting all the elders and younger disciples.

How? Why? Did they discover that Wen Ruohan was here?

Wen Ruohan emerged from his room as well, just in time as Qingheng Jun came to see him. The young leader of Gusu Lan gave a brief look at Wen Ruohan, before turning his attention back to his brother. "Qiren. Sect Leader Wen is here and it does not seem like he intends to have a peaceful talk."

With that many disciples following him, no, it was very unlikely that he was here without any intent to spill blood. Lan Qiren gulped. "Xiongzhong -"

Qingheng Jun placed a hand on his shoulder. "I have not forgotten my promise to you, Qiren. We will keep everyone safe."

The elders had all gathered at the front gate. Seeing that Sect Leader Wen had brought an army worth of cultivators with him, it would be foolish for them to welcome the uninvited guests into Cloud Recesses, as it was obvious that things were very much likely going to get ugly. Albeit not blatantly hostile, the relationship between the two sects was not good either. Sect Leader Wen had always been prideful and his values more often clashed with those of Gusu Lan.

Lan Qiren tried pushing Wen Ruohan to stay in the room but the latter refused. "If he's here with that many people, then he knows that I'm here. There is no use hiding, let's just face him and make everything clear."

Lan Qiren held his breath and shut his eyes tight in an attempt to regain calmness. Clenching his fists, he looked back at Wen Ruohan. "Fine. But promise you're not going to do anything reckless."

“Of course.”

They two, who had been taking a long nap took just a little time to make themselves presentable and joined the group of elders and senior disciples who formed straight uniformed lines at the gate, all ready with their spiritual swords or instruments. There were even several other senior disciples standing at different points at the gate in case they needed to activate the array of spells for the emergency barrier. Lan Qiren could see Qingheng Jun standing at the very front and centre, facing their opponents.

Sect Leader Wen immediately scowled upon seeing his son appearing, standing along with the Gusu Lan members. He noticed the person standing very close to Wen Ruohan, wearing the white ribbon with the cloud motifs, a sign that the person was a member of direct Lan Clan bloodline. No wonder his son refused to take his ‘lover’ as a male concubine, it would be an insult to the prestigious Lan Clan, for the direct bloodline member to be married out as a concubine.

He laid his eyes on Lan Qiren, scanning him from head to toe, before sneering. “I see. So this is your taste, huh. Not bad but not what I would have expected. For someone who can’t even listen to his own parents, what makes you think you would fit a clan with so many rules?”

Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes. “What do you know about me? How did you get here?”

“With the amount of traveling you did, it isn’t that hard to gather that my son has been going around places with a disciple of Gusu Lan. You do not possibly think I was a fool, did you, Wen Ruohan?” Sect Leader Wen rolled his eyes. “I know you. You are just like your mother, stubborn to the end but still a hopeless fool.”

Wen Ruohan’s eyes twitched. He was clearly unhappy with the comment made about his mother but decided to not speak of it. He crossed his arms. “So? Cultivators from all sects go on night hunting all the time. We are bound to come across each other sooner or later.”

Sect Leader Wen smiled coldly. “What a coincidence that the Second Young Master of Gusu Lan seems to be around the same height as your bride, not to mention even wearing the same boots.”

Damn it , Lan Qiren could not help but silently cursed in his mind. Sect Leader Wen must have somehow noticed the white boots peeking out a bit from underneath the long red dress. He really should have just painted his boots red that day, or just bear with shoes several sizes too small for just a while. Meanwhile, upon hearing the words ‘bride’ the elders all were confused and began eyeing Lan Qiren curiously. Qingheng Jun however had likely picked up something as he raised his eyebrows at Lan Qiren, who shifted uncomfortably.

Sect Leader Wen, noticing their perplexed expressions laughed. “Ah, I see, I see! Even the famed Gusu Lan’s young master has his rebellious days. Seems like your own clan has no clue about the atrocity that you have done, am I correct?”

“Qiren, what is he talking about?” One of the elders questioned.

However, Wen Ruohan interrupted before Lan Qiren could answer. "Enough. Sect Leader Wen, I believe it is clear from my actions that I wish to leave the clan and the sect. I have already returned everything that I possessed to you. If you wish to take even my sword, you may have it."

The air turned cold. Wen Ruohan's declaration was followed by a stunned silence from the Gusu Lan elders and the menacing glare from Sect Leader Wen. How could they not be shocked - Wen Ruohan, one of the best young cultivators of his generation and heir to the biggest sect, had just announced that he wished to leave his clan and his sect.

"Do not joke around, Wen Ruohan," Sect Leader Wen gritted his teeth.

"I'm not," Wen Ruohan answered firmly.

Taking a deep breath, Sect Leader Wen added, "Very well. I will allow you to take Second Young Master Lan as your official spouse, so long as you produce an heir. It doesn't matter even if the heir is from a concubine."

"Sp-sp-spouse?!" One elder exclaimed, looking like he was about to have a heart attack.

"Qiren, what is the meaning of this?" Another uttered.

"Qiren, you've always been strict to yourself and abide by the rules perfectly, what trouble are you suddenly causing us now?!"

"Silence!" Qingheng Jun raised his voice, shutting up the elders. "Qiren's matter will be dealt with later." He then turned to Wen Ruohan. "Young Master Wen, perhaps you would like to speak to your father?"

"There is nothing else for me to say. Sect Leader Wen doesn't seem to understand. I refuse to be in a sect under your rule," Wen Ruohan uttered, no hesitation in his eyes and voice. "You can go home and reflect back on why your two of your sons decided to leave home, while the only one left is pretty useless."

Sect Leader Wen trembled. Lan Qiren swallowed nervously as he noticed how the Qishan Wen leader's face had distorted from fury and how he was trembling. "You look down on me because of my current state, don't you?"

By 'current state', he was likely referring to his ruined cultivation and deteriorating health. Wen Ruohan scowled. "Not at all."

"Liar," Sect Leader Wen spat. It was evident that he had completely lost his temper now and was unable to keep his calm any longer. "You and those old coots, all the same. Calling me incompetent because of my current state. If I didn't fall into that predicament, I would have reached my full potential by now."

"You're stretching it now. I've never once looked down on you because of your condition," Wen Ruohan denied.

A maniacal laugh reverberated from Sect Leader Wen. "How many times have you bragged about your strength and called your younger brother useless, Ruohan? You and all of your greenhorn comrades - plotting against me and stealing from me, is that not proof of how little you think of me?"

"That is because-"

Sect Leader Wen did not let him retort. He raised his hand and pointed his finger at Lan Qiren. "Listen well, Lan Clan elders. Your precious clan member has snuck into my territory and impersonated the bride who was supposed to marry my son. As if that wasn't enough, he even released a prisoner of Qishan Wen. They have committed huge offenses, you dare defend them and keep my sect's prisoner here?"

The declarations resulted in an uproar from the elders as well as shocked gasps from the other senior disciples, who could not believe it. A couple of the elders already were on the verge of fainting from the shock.

"Wh...what kind of travesty is this..." one elder croaked.

"The person you brought in was a prisoner? Of another sect?!" Another elder was outraged.

Lan Qiren trembled.

He had acted recklessly, he was very much aware of that. If he returned Zhao Wu and Wen Ruohan to Qishan Wen, perhaps this confrontation could be avoided. Gusu Lan was not prepared for a fight. One of the elders was critically injured. Even with Qingheng Jun here, people would still get hurt.

However, was it the right thing to do?

Was it something he wanted to do?

Lan Qiren clenched his fists. "The prisoner did not commit a crime heinous enough to be tortured, to the point of being kept in that state."

"That is not up for you to decide. Qiren, this matter is between Qishan Wen," one of the elders said. "We Gusu Lan have no right to interfere."

Lan Qiren shook his head. "Grand-uncle, Qishan Wen came here marching with their disciples clearly ready to attack us and people under our protection."

"We are not obligated, nor should we interfere in matters of another sect. In the first place, you shouldn't have trespassed another sect's grounds and stole their prisoner! Not to mention, disguising as...b-bride...have you no shame?!"

"Is upholding justice not our principle?!" Lan Qiren raised his voice.

He thought of Lan Wangji, kneeling in the snow, remaining sturdy and maintaining his stance as he received the thirty-three lashes. He thought of Wei Wuxian, letting go of a secure sect protection for the sake of defending little A Yuan and his family.

“How dare you speak of upholding justice when you’ve committed crimes? Do you value a stranger more than your own clan?”

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth.

He threw away all his worries and all his restraints.

The elders gasped as Lan Qiren tugged the white forehead ribbon off his head, before taking Wen Ruohan's hand and tying the ribbon around his wrist. Qingheng Jun dropped his jaw and could only watch with shock as well as amazement as his brother lifted Wen Ruohan's arm, showing off the white ribbon tied around his wrist for everyone to see.

“Elders,” Lan Qiren held his breath. “This man is my husband and I will not let him go.”

His declaration silenced the entire scene for a moment. Hearing his words and seeing his actions, the elders were unable to even voice their protest. The forehead ribbon was sacred to members of Gusu Lan, it was a sign of restraint and could only be touched by family members as well as their significant others. The fact that Lan Qiren had boldly claimed Wen Ruohan by binding his wrist with the forehead ribbon, right in front of all his clan members, showed how determined he was.

Wen Ruohan stared at his beloved, eyes wide open. His lips parted open, yet he was too stunned, too happy, too enamoured to even express his feelings with words. Why? Why did this man keep surprising him again and again? Why did this man keep making him fall in love, even deeper and harder? How was Wen Ruohan's heart supposed to last, when Lan Qiren was making it beat faster all the time?

As much as it made Wen Ruohan overjoyed, Sect Leader Wen on the contrary was infuriated. His face darkened. “I see there is no more room for any peaceful exchange of words. Well then, I believe we ought to teach Gusu Lan a lesson for daring to go against us Qishan Wen.”

A Zhao was just sitting together with his new friends to do their assignments, when he saw a familiar face approaching him. His eyes grew wide. “Bai Shijie?”

“Xiao Liu!” Bai Yiqing cried and pulled the young boy into a tight embrace. “Xiao Liu... you're safe. I can't believe... I'd be able to see you again.”

A Zhao returned the hug happily. “Ren Ge and Han Ge saved me, Shijie. Did they also bring you here?”

Bai Yiqing shook her head. She rubbed A Zhao's hair, smiling as she took a look at his healthy complexion, plump cheeks, and clean white clothes. He was being well cared here, and was even making new friends. “No. Sect Leader Lan brought me here.”

“Ren Ge's older brother?” A Zhao questioned.

Bai Yiqing nodded. "Guess what? Those big brothers and sisters rescued Xiao Wu too."

"Wu Ge? Wu Ge is here?" A Zhao beamed. "Shijie, where is Wu Ge? I want to see Wu Ge!"

Bai Yiqing chuckled. "Finish whatever task you're doing, Xiao Liu, and we can visit Xiao Wu together after that."

"Mm!"

A Zhao waved his hand goodbye to his new classmates before following Bai Yiqing. However, they were stopped from visiting the infirmary building by a junior disciple, who was running around frantically.

"What's going on here?" Bai Yiqing asked, puzzled. For the past days she had been at Cloud Recesses she had never once seen a Gusu Lan disciple running or shouting, hence seeing the young disciple acting like this was an unusual sight.

"Qishan Wen, Qishan Wen is here and they're attacking us!" The disciple uttered in a loud, shaky voice. "We have to bring the children to safety!"

Bai Yiqing dropped her jaws. "A-attack?!"

They had no more time to question the young disciple. Soon there were loud noises of people shouting and swords clashing, and Bai Yiqing knew the Wen cultivators had managed to intrude past the defense. Her sword had been confiscated when she first came and she had yet to retrieve it, hence she had no choice but to grab a broken tree branch for a weapon. Pushing A Zhao behind, she calmly ordered, "Go join your friends to safety, Xiao Liu!"

In a sect as big as Gusu Lan, they ought to have already planned an escape route should an emergency like this were to occur. Without a proper weapon, she was going to have a much harder time fighting.

"But Shijie-"

"Go!" She urged him upon seeing men in red rushing in. Gritting her teeth, she lunged towards them, blocking them from attacking the younger disciples and destroying the building.

Some of the Wen cultivators came in casting fire talismans to burn down the building. The panicked junior disciples were not prepared and very few managed to scribble out properly working water talismans to counter. A Zhao, who noticed the infirmary building beginning to catch fire widened his eyes and gasped.

Wu Ge. Wu Ge is still inside!

He gathered some dirt using his robes and piled them over the burning wall to put out the fire. It was not enough. A Zhao rushed towards the entrance and kicked the door down. "Wu Ge! Wu Ge!"

There was no answer. A Zhao panicked. He looked for a well to get some water but a Wen cultivator noticed him and moved forward to attack him.

A Zhao turned to run but there was no safe exit, for all surrounding him was a burning building as well as more Wen cultivators. The man swung his sword and he shut his eyes as he ducked down.

There was a sound of iron clashing. A Zhao slowly opened his eyes and blinked. He lifted his head and gasped. "... Wu Ge?"

Zhao Wu stood firmly, a sword in hand, stolen from a fallen Wen cultivator. His eyes were burning with rage.

"Wen dogs. Go to hell," he hissed.

...Flashback...

Zhao Wu had never seen this village before. To be fair, he was barely able to travel this far before. The slave traders preferred to keep them settled in one place until they were ready to be sold. When they met Master Zhao, the man had found them a new home to live in. Zhao Wu spent most of his time learning and taking care of his younger siblings, with barely any time to go out.

He hoped they would be safe in that temple. The monks had promised that they would keep the children safe.

Now Zhao Wu needed to look for a shelter to stay for the night. The sky was turning dark and it was going to rain. He was exhausted, hungry, with no money to spare for an inn room.

He noticed a young man, sitting down and leaning against a tree just across him. He was dressed in dull grey and black robes. His long black hair was tied in a simple white ribbon, with a single wooden hairpin on the bun. Albeit dressed very modestly, Zhao Wu's eyes instantly caught the sword strapped on the man's back. The scabbard looked cheap but the hilt was carved exquisitely. This was no ordinary man. This was possibly a young master pretending to be a common rogue.

If he was a young master, it was possible that he would have some money with him. He did not appear intimidating and more importantly Zhao Wu was desperate. That was it. He was just hungry and desperate. Clutching the small dagger hidden under his sleeves, he leapt and pounced at the young man.

Only to be subdued instantly. Zhao Wu blinked, finding himself with his back on the ground and the young man on top of him, holding his two wrists above his head. The young man

narrowed his eyes. "Trying to attack me? Who sent you?"

Zhao Wu gritted his teeth. This man was strong. "I... I just wanted to..."

"What?" The man's expression hardened. "Who sent you? Was it my father?"

He quickly shook his head. By this man's words, it appeared that he was also on the run.

"Then?" He questioned, pressing his knees against Zhao Wu's abdomen.

He choked from the pain. "I just... just wanted to rob you! I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"As if I would trust you. Why would you rob me, when I'm not even displaying any wealth-"

Right at that moment, Zhao Wu's stomach grumbled out loud, as if a thousand beggars were yelling from his tummy demanding to be filled. His face instantly turned crimson while the young man only looked stunned.

"Young master... I don't know if you've ever lived a life of hardship before but anyone able to afford that kind of sword, to me, can't be poor," Zhao Wu uttered.

The young man slowly released him. He eyed him suspiciously. "You really aren't someone from...my father?"

"I don't even know you, let alone your father ah!" He grumbled. "I haven't eaten for three days, I just needed some coins!"

The man fell silent. He then suddenly burst out laughing.

Zhao Wu scowled. "What's so funny, ah? Is people's misfortune an entertainment to you?"

The youth shook his head. "Pardon me. I've been on the run for a long while, anything and anyone just makes me... paranoid. Forgive me, young master."

"I ain't a young master, if you can't tell already," Zhao Wu retorted. As if a young master would end up like this.

"What should I call you then?"

Zhao Wu scratched the back of his neck. "Zhao Wu."

The young man nodded. "Zhao Wu, I see. I'm Wen Lin. Our meeting must be fated. A funny one, though."

"Fated?" He repeated.

"You claim you want to rob me, but just a few days ago I've already lost my money pouch while travelling," Wen Lin shrugged. "Why else do you think I'm laying down here instead of searching for an inn to stay for the night?"

"...." Zhao Wu sighed. "Shit. My luck is shit."

Wen Lin shrugged. "Both of us. Since we're both in this state, shall we stay and help each other?"

Their first meeting was spent bickering as they walked around the village searching for perhaps a woodshed or an empty stable for a shelter against the pouring rain. Luckily for them, they found refuge in the temple at Hudie Village. The monks claimed it was a temple erected to worship the butterfly goddess, who gave blessings to couples in love.

An idea popped in their minds. They were both out of money, with no place to stay. Zhao Wu took Wen Lin's hand and looked at the monks intently. "Will the goddess bless the union of even cut-sleeves?"

They made up a story of how they were both young men who met and fell in love, but were forced to elope due to their families' opposition. The monks ate up their lies and not only were willing to provide them a roof for the night, but even to shelter them for as long as they liked.

"You are crazy," Wen Lin rolled his eyes at him as he laid down the straw mat and bed sheets.

"You agreed to my craziness," Zhao Wu replied nonchalantly.

Wen Lin sighed and laid down. "If my brother were to see this, you'd be minced meat."

They talked about their families. Wen Lin told him about his older brother, a prideful man who often spent more time night hunting than actually learning the ropes around leading the sect. Zhao Wu talked about Xiao Ba, his little sister who loved sweets as well as Xiao Liu, who enjoyed people's company so much he would stick like a rice cake to him. Sometimes he wondered why Wen Lin was running away like this, if he had a brother who treasured him that much. What kind of predicament had fallen upon him? As curious as he was, he understood he was still a stranger to Wen Lin, and decided to not inquire about it, not until Wen Lin himself was comfortable talking about it.

The following days, they discussed about how they should make a living, so that they would not be a burden to the monks. Leaving the village in their current state was risky, they were both penniless and Zhao Wu was aware that Wen Lin was trying to escape his own father, while he was trying to hide from Yueyang Chang Sect. Hudie Village did not have any cultivation sect, hence they decided to start by making talismans for the villagers while also performing odd jobs to mix in.

Wen Lin had a very nice handwriting. His fingers were long and slim, with little calluses, and Zhao Wu often found himself staring at him whenever he sat on the desk, working on the talismans.

"You have a very different way of drawing talismans," Wen Lin commented upon seeing Zhao Wu's handiwork.

"This is how my Shifu taught me," he answered. He had no other way of knowing what other talismans looked like.

"We shouldn't make the talismans too distinctive, for the sake of our safety we should make a standard one that everyone knows," said Wen Lin.

He stood behind Zhao Wu and placed his fingers over Zhao Wu's own, gently guiding his hand on the right way to make a standardized version of protective talismans.

At that moment, Zhao Wu could feel his heart racing. Wen Lin's touch against Zhao Wu's skin for some reason felt warm. Strange. Zhao Wu had held the hands of many boys and girls, yet nobody felt as warm as Wen Lin.

Days passed and they learned about each other more.

Wen Lin, he learned, was a very clean and neat person. He could not stand the room being dirty and never failed to nag Zhao Wu if he forgot to fold and store the bedsheets. He cleaned himself regularly, meaning Zhao Wu as his fake husband had to carry a bucket of water for his bath everyday, otherwise the monks would be questioning why he wasn't doting on a husband he was willing to elope with. He wasn't shy, but he was quite awkward with social interactions and had trouble refusing other people's requests.

Whenever the village aunties started asking for too much from Wen Lin, Zhao Wu had to be the one stepping in to save him from their endless requests for help. They were not even getting paid half of the time, yet Wen Lin was willing to offer his assistance even for just a piece of steamed bun.

How did someone this nice offend his own family that he had to run away?

His question was answered when Wen Lin finally confessed that he had plotted with his brother and cousin to steal an important relic from his father, hence the reason why he was being chased. Zhao Wu had in fact heard of Qishan Wen. Who in the cultivation world wouldn't know about Qishan Wen, the biggest cultivation sect? He just never thought that Wen Lin was in fact the son of Sect Leader Wen. He thought the surname was merely coincidental.

However, perhaps Wen Lin's words during their initial meeting was true. They really were fated to encounter each other, for he too was on the run and with him was the precious note belonging to his late master. Whatever was in this note had killed Shifu and Xue Shixiong, yet Zhao Wu was holding on to it foolishly, as if it was the only memento he had of Shifu. In a way, perhaps it was. With all the other adults gone and Yueyang Chang ransacking their place, nothing else had remained.

What a cruel joke it was for the deities to have brought him to his soulmate in this manner.

Yet the more he got to know him, Zhao Wu could not help finding himself falling for Wen Lin.

"A Lin," he said as they laid in their bedsheets, then paused to stare at the wooden ceiling.
"Do you want to get married?"

"Aren't we already?" Wen Lin mumbled sleepily.

"I want to perform the three bows with you. For real. In front of the goddess."

Wen Lin's eyes popped open.

Zhao Wu held his breath. He searched for Wen Lin's hands and clutched them tight. "A Lin... I have a secret, a treasure with me and I want to trust you with my secret."

That night, they paid respect to the butterfly goddess for the second time, but bowed to each other for the first time. For the first time they slept close to each other, basking in the warmth of the other, skin against skin, fingers clasping and bodies entangled. Zhao Wu swore for a split second he saw a flicker of silver fluttering before his eyes.

Like a butterfly.

Chapter End Notes

Also there's a WenQi week coming up so come and yeet yourself into this rarepair abyss deeper! UwU

<https://twitter.com/wenqiweek/status/1367966739321950210>

The pain of losing

Chapter Notes

fighting scene... isn't fun... i keep struggling....
o)--<

i'm ded now

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It felt as if he was reliving a nightmare, to see people in the Qishan Wen's red robes rushing in and swinging their swords, mercilessly attacking the panicked disciples in Gusu Lan's white robes. Just like before, Gusu Lan was not given the time to get ready for an attack by a larger and stronger sect. Whereas they had the twin jades of Lan before, this time they had Qingheng Jun and Lan Qiren.

Unlike his original timeline though, the one leading the attack was not the firstborn son Wen Xu, but Sect Leader Wen himself. However, Sect Leader Wen was no Wen Ruohan. He had the experience and he was merciless, but he did not have half the strength of Wen Ruohan with his Yin Iron. Still, it didn't mean he was an easy opponent.

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth as he swung his sword. Having Wen Ruohan on their side logically should give them the advantage, but at the same time his presence could not really help much - not when he was forced to fight his own people. Lan Qiren could see it from his moves, rather than attacking he was focusing more on defense and stopping the Qishan Wen cultivators from going after the non-combatant members of Gusu Lan.

He could hear the sound of multiple signal flares being released and he began to panic. They were barely holding on. Qingheng Jun alone was fighting against Sect Leader Wen and his right-hand man. The elders had to protect the younger juniors and non-combatants, as well as worked hard to extinguish the fire. The senior disciples, albeit experienced with fighting, were caught unprepared for an attack in their own home. If Qishan Wen were to bring in more people into the fight, there was no telling how much Gusu Lan would suffer.

Then two blurry figures in purple jumped in front of him, swiftly kicking the Wen cultivator who was about to attack him. Lan Qiren blinked.

He could not recall the last time he had ever seen Wei Changze and Jiang Fengmian fighting together like this. Jiang Fengmian smiled at him. "Should have alerted us sooner, Second Young Master! Imagine our surprise, to be woken up with blaring alarms!"

Wei Changze nodded. "We could have joined the fight since the beginning."

"But..." Lan Qiren gasped. This was a fight against Qishan Wen, caused by him. How could he endanger more people, after what he had made them go through?

"I hope you don't forget we are all friends in the same boat here, Second Young Master Lan!" A flurry of white flashed past him, knocking down another cultivator. Lan Qiren widened his eyes as Cangse Sanren swirled in a deft move to fight two cultivators at once. "We get into trouble together and we're going to get ourselves out of it together!"

On the other side, Yu Ziyuan appeared, with Zidian in hand whipping three men in one lash. "Or rather, the uncouth lady is just taking responsibility for her silly ideas."

Cangse Sanren gasped. "It was A Ze's idea and don't you dare call him silly! Only I am allowed to make fun of him!"

"Shut your mouth and move your hands instead!"

"You're so mean Yu Jiejie! I just can't shut my mouth even if I want to!"

Despite their banter, the two ladies worked in perfect sync, with Yu Ziyuan catching their enemies with her whip and flinging them towards Cangse Sanren, who performed the finishing attacks. On the other side, Jiang Fengmian and Wei Changze worked together without any exchange of words, their steps and move perfectly complimenting and assisting each other's attacks, like a pair of twin blades.

Heavy stampedes of boots approached Cloud Recesses as more Qishan Wen cultivators, who were previously waiting at the boats, were summoned by the signal flare and joined the fight. The front gate was demolished and an army of cultivators came rushing in.

They were all repelled by a large wave of spiritual energy, coming from Nie Yizhou, who had made his grand entry into the battlefield swinging his large blade. The blade howled, announcing its thirst for blood. Nie Yizhou leapt, making use of his large frame to launch one large attack that swept off multiple Qishan Wen cultivators in one time. He roared, "Qishan Wen! If you have the right minds, cease right now! Do you wish to go against all three major clans? No matter how large you are, you do not have the power to win over three of us combined!"

Sect Leader Wen's face turned even darker. "Are puny clan heirs revolting against us now?!"

Nie Yizhou sneered. "Even your own children are against your ways, what made you think other clans will heed to you?"

Murderous aura emanated from the older man. The grip on his sword tightened so much that the blade was shaking and blood dripped down from his palm. "Then I don't need those traitorous children."

He cut his way through, leaving his right-hand man to deal with Qingheng Jun while pushing away the mess of cultivators scattered all over the place, not caring whether they were his own people or the Gusu Lan members. One by one more people dropped down, staining the

ground crimson. Wen Ruohan's eyes widened in shock, perhaps not quite expecting that his father really would lunge at him with the genuine intention to kill.

"Wen Ruohan!" Lan Qiren gasped, hastening his step to aid Wen Ruohan but was stopped by more incoming opponents.

"Don't come!" Wen Ruohan yelled, swords clashing against his father. He narrowed his eyes. "The Yin Iron really has corroded your mind, father. Ten years ago I would have never imagined you would hurt your own son, no matter how strict you were."

"Ten years ago you were also not a traitor," Sect Leader Wen snarled. "The only fitting punishment for a traitor should be death!"

Wen Ruohan gritted his teeth, pressing his feet more firmly against the ground while strengthening the grip on his sword. The blade was right in front of him, reflecting his father's dark expression that was unlike anything he had seen before, almost as if his father had been possessed by the devil. Wen Ruohan knew the resentful energy lingering from the Yin Iron had corrupted his father's mind completely now. With his damaged golden core, he could not do anything to counter its effect, not when he was already haunted by the inner demons of his anger and frustrations. "Don't make me commit patricide, old man. I'm willing to get kicked out but unlike you I'm not heartless enough to kill a family member."

"A family member? I'm eliminating a deserter," Sect Leader Wen hissed. He pressed one palm against his chest and Wen Ruohan could not help noticing the dark red seeping into his clothes. "My own kin is doing this. You would be more useful in your death."

Dark smoky wisps began drifting from the bloodied hand and upon noticing the anomaly, Wen Ruohan quickly leapt away. However, the tendrils extended and wrapped around his four limbs and Wen Ruohan was instantly alarmed. It was as if something heavy was pushing him down and preventing him from moving. His heart was pulsating and his head started throbbing painfully.

"Wen Ruohan, move away!"

He could hear Lan Qiren's voice warning him and he knew whatever was attacking him could be fatal. He gritted his teeth and focused on spreading out his spiritual energy to disperse the black tendrils away but for some reason his golden core was not responding.

Lan Qiren panicked. Sect Leader Wen had come here prepared and the bloodied hand pressing against his chest could possibly be a hidden move to activate a curse. Otherwise there was no explanation as to why Wen Ruohan appeared as if he had been frozen in time. No choice left, he dropped his sword, summoned his qin and strummed the strings to send a wave of spiritual energy towards Sect Leader Wen.

It hit the sect leader right on his side, throwing him a good distance away from Wen Ruohan, crashing into the wall of rules. However, just shortly after, an enraged Qishan Wen cultivator used the opportunity to pierce his blade through the qin. Lan Qiren hissed as he felt the sharp blade making a cut on his left cheek, but was just grateful that it did not reach his neck.

“RenRen!” Wen Ruohan shouted, horrified to see the blood dripping down his beloved’s previously smooth unmarred face.

“I’m fine!” He yelled back. “Move away before he comes back-”

Right as he was warning him, Sect Leader Wen had already risen back. Driven by anger, he once again attempted to pounce at Wen Ruohan.

A figure appeared however to intervene, blocking the way and swinging his fist right at Sect Leader Wen’s face.

Lan Qiren gasped.

Zhao Wu moved with the agility that should not belong to a man whose body had been starved and tortured for days. Resentment was evident in his expression.

Sect Leader Wen’s face distorted. “The rat.”

Zhao Wu was trembling. “I’m not going to allow you to hurt A Lin anymore.”

Lan Qiren blinked. Did he mistook Wen Ruohan as Wen Lin due to their resemblance? Sect Leader Wen seemed to have come to the same conclusion as well, and promptly spat, “Wen Lin, the traitor? You must not be aware that he’s dead, perhaps all thanks to their little plots.”

Zhao Wu clenched his fists. “I know. When A Lin didn’t show up at our promised meeting place, I had a feeling.”

He just did not want to admit it. A part of him wondered if Wen Lin had perhaps betrayed him by returning home with the notes to appease his father and get back on his good side. Another part of him dreaded that maybe A Lin was caught. When he went to Nightless City in hopes to see A Lin again, his fear was only amplified as days passed and the Qishan Wen cultivators never once questioned him about Wen Lin.

When someone else other than Wen Lin came to rescue him, he held a small hope that perhaps, A Lin was safe as well.

Except that they were there to rescue him because A Lin was already dead.

“He was already buried, but... I doubt Zhao Wu would be able to keep his calm if he were to find out the manners of how his spouse was unjustly killed and the way his body was dumped to hide the evidence.”

His eyes were too heavy to open and his limbs were too weak to move, but he heard the voices talking around him clearly. A Lin was gone, unjustly killed and disrespected even after death.

No amount of torture could rival the pain he felt when he registered the words into his mind. It felt as if his heart had been shattered to pieces and scattered like dirt. Tears pooled in his eyes and he pursed his lips. If there was one last thing he could do for A Lin, it would be to protect his dreams, to protect those whom he cherished.

Sect Leader Wen switched his target, leaping forward with his sword pointed at Zhao Wu. The latter did not move, instead focusing his spiritual energy on his bare fist.

The moment the sword made contact on his abdomen, Zhao Wu grabbed the blade with his right hand, neglecting the pain from the sharp metal on his bleeding palm, then swiftly struck Sect Leader Wen with his left fist.

The older man gasped, appearing as if the last drop of his life had just been sucked out of his body. Sparks flew, and he was once again hurled into the cracked wall of rules, spitting out dark crimson liquid into the ground as his back painfully hit against the cold stone.

Lan Qiren froze. He had not once witnessed it with his own eyes before, but he had heard enough description of it. The attack that Zhao Wu had just performed was likely the core-melting technique. It would destroy any cultivation with no hopes of retrieving it, and many cultivators had met their ends after losing their cores.

Seeing their leader remaining on the ground unmoving, some of the Qishan Wen cultivators were enraged, while the others were too stunned and were losing their battle spirit. Qingheng Jun took the chance to pull the finishing moves on Wen Ruohan's right-hand man in order to stop him from taking over the leadership.

"Qishan Wen, your leader has been defeated!" He declared. "Drop your weapons!"

Some of the Qishan Wen members had dropped their swords, though some were still adamant of battling to the end, too prideful to give up.

Wen Ruohan slowly walked over to where the man he had once called father was laying down. Kneeling down, he carefully placed his finger against the man's neck, then examined his wrist. There was a very faint pulse, diminishing to nothing as seconds passed. His eyes widened. "His golden core...."

Zhao Wu stood there, unmoving. Blood continued dripping down his fingers as he stared at the scene lifelessly. "I'm not sorry."

Sect Leader Wen had been plagued with a poison that halted his cultivation progress for years. Without the golden core to suppress the toxins, the poison had spread and naturally took his last breath. Wen Ruohan bit his lips. On one hand, this was still the man who at one point in his life did raise him and taught him to fight. On the other hand, this man today had come with the intention to hurt people and did not hesitate to kill him.

He just wished things did not have to end like this. Clenching his fists, he restrained himself from letting tears fall down, opting to instead take off his outer robes and covering his father's face, as one last act of respect.

Heavy marching footsteps approached them, but this time it wasn't the Qishan Wen members. Cultivators bearing Qinghe Nie's emblem rushed in, much to the surprise of the people inside. A smaller group of men in Yunmeng Jiang's purple also joined them, all pointing their swords ready for a battle. The remaining Qishan Wen members who previously refused to drop their weapons realized they were indeed fighting a losing battle and finally halted their attacks.

Their leader was gone! Qinghe Nie and Yunmeng Jiang had shown their solidarity with Gusu Lan. There was no reason for them to fight anymore other than pride, but without their leader and commander, they lost the motivation.

With the battle in a standstill, Lan Qiren was finally able to go to where Wen Ruohan was. He furrowed his brows. "Wen Ruohan..."

Wen Ruohan remained in his position for a moment, before finally standing up and letting out the long breath he was holding. He held on Lan Qiren's hand tightly, as if to gather some strength, before fixing his expression and announcing, "Sect Leader Wen is dead. As someone who has defected from the sect, I have no right to announce myself as the new leader."

There was a momentary silence. Lan Qiren noticed how several of the cultivators seemed conflicted. Perhaps they were among those who admired Wen Ruohan and were supporting him, hence they were disappointed that he was not going to reclaim the position.

Wen Ruohan continued, "However, know that I will forever value the lives of sect members, who I know were simply following orders. Drop your weapons if you value your lives. Since this war was started because of me, naturally I will take the responsibility and punishment."

His announcement was followed by shocked gasps and looks of disbelief. One of the senior Wen cultivators dropped his sword, then knelt before Wen Ruohan. "Young master. It does not make sense for you to take responsibility, yet have no power. It will seem as if we as a sect have made someone who once brought us pride, as a scapegoat."

Wen Ruohan crossed his arms. "What do you suggest?"

The senior cultivator glanced at his fellow sect members, who all eventually dropped down their swords and knelt, as a sign that they had admitted their loss. The senior cultivator bowed down, "The heir of Qishan Wen, Wen Ruohan rebelled against his father's decision, eloped, and took over the leadership successfully."

Wen Ruohan gawked and pointed at himself. "You're going to paint me as an usurper?!"

"Sect Leader Wen died in the hands of a stranger. That is a fact that everyone here has witnessed," Qingheng Jun interjected. He eyed them carefully. "With the amount of damage happening today, I would suggest a collective punishment shared by everyone rather than pushing the blame to a single person. I do not believe you can take three hundred discipline whips alone, Young Master Wen."

Wen Ruohan's eyes winced, for he had heard of how painful a single discipline whip of Gusu Lan could be. "Three... three hundred..."

If Lan Wangji had to stay bedridden from thirty-three whips, Wen Ruohan might stay in bed (or worse, in a coffin) for eternity after three hundred whips. Lan Qiren sighed and placed a hand on Wen Ruohan's shoulder. "Accept the verdict, for everyone."

Wen Ruohan appeared hesitant but he solemnly nodded. He turned to face Qingheng Jun this time, and knelt down. "Qishan Wen has lost the battle. Our sect has terrorized Gusu Lan and caused so much loss and damage. For that we owe you an apology. We will compensate three times the amount of the material loss, mourn for the dead, as well as surrender ourselves for punishment."

Qingheng Jun nodded. "We will talk about the punishment later. For now, let us do the most important thing - treat the injured ones, and manage those who unfortunately lost their lives."

Cangse Sanren, watched from the sidelines and exhaled with relief. "It's...it's over, right?"

Wei Changze nodded. "The battle is over, for now," he said as his eyes followed the figures of Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren, who began by carrying away Sect Leader Wen's body. This event must be particularly hard for the two of them. Regardless, Wen Ruohan had lost his father, the same person who attacked the people who helped him. Meanwhile, Lan Qiren would not be able to be at peace after seeing the damage on his home, and may blame himself for this event.

Yu Ziyuan's Zidian returned to its ring form and she patted her robes off the dirt. Glancing at Jiang Fengmian, she asked, "How did Yunmeng Jiang and Qinghe Nie arrive here so quickly?"

Jiang Fengmian smiled. "Young Master Nie and I talked about it while we were planning Young Master Wen's rescue. In case Qishan Wen were to come, we should have some people ready. They have been staying in Caiyi Town for a couple days, and were only waiting for the signal flares."

Yu Ziyuan hummed. "That's smart. I didn't think you would have thought of that."

Jiang Fengmian frowned. "Were you questioning my intelligence before?"

"Nonsense, don't twist my words."

"That was completely what you were implying!"

They stopped their brief bickering there and proceeded to help carry the injured people to their classroom, which had been converted to a makeshift infirmary instead. The infirmary building was destroyed in the fire but fortunately most of the main building were not as terribly damaged due to the elders' effort.

Bai Yiqing appeared with all the children and non-cultivators whom she had been guarding earlier. She was horrified to see the number of casualties, but also relieved to see Qingheng Jun and the people she knew safe. Qingheng Jun carried in Zhao Wu, whose limbs had given up by now from all the strain of forcing himself to move.

The battle, compared to the SunShot Campaign and the attack led by Wen Xu was very brief with much less damage. Still, it had taken the lives of fifty Gusu Lan members and eighty Qishan Wen members. Over one hundred people from each side required medical attention. One third of the sect building was destroyed.

Lan Qiren could not help feeling overwhelmed with guilt as he sat down in an isolated corner, grinding more herb paste to replenish the medication stock. Wen Ruohan had already sent a messenger to summon for Dafan Wen's assistance. There were more injured people than they could handle and inadequate supplies. He wondered if he could have planned and done better. In the end people still died.

People who were supposed to be born may not be born. What had he done?

"Second Young Master Lan, are you okay?" Wei Changze's voice brought him out from his momentary trance.

Lan Qiren blinked. He then looked down again. "... Do you think... I've messed up?"

Wei Changze arched his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"So many people died."

"How many died before the success of SunShot Campaign?"

"They're both wrong," Lan Qiren felt the bitterness in the back of his throat. "People still died."

Wei Changze nodded. He patted Lan Qiren's back. "I can't stop you from feeling the guilt of not being able to save everyone, but... Second Young Master, think of all the people you've saved as well. Our friends and myself. Your brother and sister-in-law. Wen Ruoyu and his family. All the people who died from Qishan Wen's cruelty. Wen Ruohan himself."

Lan Qiren swallowed hard. It was hard to think about the possible positive outcome, when he was quite literally witnessing people dying and getting hurt again. To see the result of what he thought was his selfishness.

Wei Changze let out a long exhale. "We will share the burden, Second Young Master Lan. You brought Wen Ruohan here, but I was the one who told you to seduce him to avoid our deaths."

The sound of porcelain clattering on the floor stunned them.

"What do you mean by that?"

Lan Qiren turned. He immediately paled upon seeing Wen Ruohan standing with a tilted empty tray in hand, his face filled with confusion.

The tea cup cracked.

~EXTRA~

Wen Lin had always thought that if he were to get married, it would only be an arranged marriage with a woman from a prominent clan. He may be the son of a mistress but he was still born from the leader of the strongest sect in the cultivation world. Or at least that was what his father and the elders claimed. Wen Ruohan sometimes commented about how their sect seemed to be in a decline, with how save for Wen Ruohan himself and a couple others, they barely had competent cultivators in their generation.

Wen Ruohan had even once made a joke about switching to healing cultivation as their main practice, to make their sect different from the others. It was perhaps just something he casually mentioned without much thought of due to his close relationship to Wen Ruoyu, but he received protests and objections from all the elders, who accused him of trying to erase their long history and tradition, even saying he was besmirching Wen Mao's legacy. Frankly, Wen Lin thought it wasn't such a bad idea.

It wasn't as if the elders were doing a good job of honouring Wen Mao's legacy anyway. They were all relying on Wen Ruohan's talent to be able to boast during the annual discussion conferences. Wen Mao would be rolling in his grave from shame if he were to see how these elders were behaving. For all the talks about keeping the traditions, they certainly had abandoned Wen Mao's teachings.

Whenever he ranted about it to Zhao Wu, his husband would laugh. Wen Lin had never once felt this comfortable speaking out his thoughts and pouring his feelings to anyone other than his brother before. Zhao Wu was unlike anyone else. He was loud and brash, but he was also so gentle. He doted on Wen Lin gently. He always made sure the bathwater was just the right temperature. He never failed to ask if Wen Lin had eaten. He would stop Wen Lin from working too much.

He constantly listened to every word. He claimed to be a poor confidante, but Wen Lin thought just having Zhao Wu holding his hands tightly and looking into his eyes with such adorations were enough.

Life after marriage was a financial struggle compared to Nightless City, yet emotionally he felt as if he was living in cloud nine. Nothing felt better than being able to proudly call Zhao Wu 'husband'. Each time Zhao Wu pulled him into a tight embrace, Wen Lin felt an inexplicable sense of warmth that he had never once experienced back in Nightless City. Being the son of a mistress, he wasn't favoured by the elders and even though Wen Ruohan took care of him well, they weren't allowed to interact with each other too much.

When Zhao Wu suddenly returned from the market with a face as pale as a ghost, Wen Lin realized the moment they had been dreading for so much was coming.

There was no time to waste. Bringing the notes was risky, either one of them could possibly get caught. However, knowing the monks here were trustworthy enough, they left the notes with the monks, promising to come back soon. Leaving with nothing but the clothes on their back, they fled Hudie Village in the middle of a stormy night.

In the midst of the fight against Yueyang Chang, he was forced to split up with his husband.

It's fine. We've promised to meet again , Wen Lin told himself as he wandered alone in the darkness, cold and starved.

He was injured and penniless but Huanying Village posed an opportunity. The village head complained of a goblin making troubles for the villagers and how there were no cultivators around to help. Wen Lin offered his assistance, in exchange for shelter and food. A small goblin shouldn't be too much of a challenge. Once he cleared this up, he could take some time to heal, go back and search for his husband.

The goblin hadn't been too difficult to capture. He brought back the goblin corpse as promised and the village head offered to serve him a feast to thank him.

At that point, he was not only fatigued, but his wounds had reopened. Without proper rest and nutrition, he could not heal himself. As much as he wanted to minimize interactions with the villagers, Wen Lin reluctantly agreed.

The village head's wife kept making advances at him. It was uncomfortable.

He missed his husband.

The dining room was reeking of alcohol and the moment the madam laid her hands on his shoulders, the village head suddenly yelled angrily and grabbed the heirloom sword hanging on the wall. Wen Lin's eyes widened. He moved to avoid the swing of the blade. It hurt. His head was spinning and he could feel the bandages soaked with blood again.

It happened within a split of a second. Something cold hit him and soon, he dropped to the floor. There was a sound of a loud, terrified shriek.

Ah. Heal. Please, heal... my core...please, heal my wounds...

I can't die here. My soulmate is waiting.

Two pairs of arms dragged him, carrying his body outside. The last thing Wen Lin could see was the blurry visage of his murderer, before cold water came rushing into his lungs painfully and everything turned dark.

It's freezing.

He missed his husband.

He wanted to be in his arms, where he could feel warm and safe.

Please... until I can see him... I don't want to die. I don't want to be alone.

Chapter End Notes

i'm guessing major sects probably have at least a thousand members, so... considering this is a fairly short battle compared to sunshot, the amount of casualties isn't as many, but still....there will be casualties.

anyway, looks like we're almost reaching the end. maybe 2 or 3 chapters more? I thought I was gonna end this at 28 chapters, but let's see if I can make it 30 just to make it an even number lol

The Revelation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Qingheng Jun sat down, exhausted. It felt like a very long day. He glanced at the window, looking at the dark clouds. It was probably going to rain the following day. It felt as if the sky was also weeping for the loss of many lives that day.

The door suddenly opened and he blinked, stunned to see Bai Yiqing coming in with a pot of tea and some sweet sliced peaches in a tray. She carefully placed the tray on his desk, poured the hot tea and smiled warmly. "One of the disciples mentioned you haven't eaten yet. I couldn't use the kitchen but they gave me some peaches."

Qingheng Jun nodded. "Thank you. You haven't eaten as well, have you?"

"The kitchen ladies gave me some dried persimmons to snack on earlier. Everyone is busy tending the injured ones, I feel a little bad."

"Don't be. You helped out a lot today. I heard you protected the young ones and looked after the injured men too," Qingheng Jun quickly said.

"I was just doing what's right," she replied. "Do you think the sect will be okay?"

"The healer branch of Wen Clan from Dafan Mountain will be coming over to lend their assistance and send more medical supplies. Yunmeng Jiang and Qinghe Nie also offered to help rebuild the destroyed buildings," Qingheng Jun said.

Perhaps Gusu Lan's tradition of opening their gates for disciples from other sects to come and learn was in fact a blessing. Thanks to the good relations built from centuries and decades of sharing their knowledge, they were able to have other sects standing by their side, helping them in such moments. No doubt, the loss of many people would still have Gusu Lan in a long period of grief, but at least with the other sects assisting them, the burden of the property destruction would be eased.

"As cultivators, we were long aware of the risk of losing our own lives or those dear to us, whether it would be from a night hunt incident, or in our fights against evil," Qingheng Jun said. "That does not mean we do not grieve. However, I believe we will be able to get through this and grow stronger as a clan and a sect."

Bai Yiqing smiled. "That is good to hear."

Qingheng Jun fell silent, watching her smile. In the dimly lit room, with only a single candle and the moonlight shining through the window, Bai Yiqing looked ethereal. His heart suddenly began to race and Qingheng Jun gulped. It was late at night, most of the residents of Cloud Recesses were already asleep, and it was just the two of them in his room.

He coughed. "Maiden Bai... perhaps it will be better for you to return to your room. It is improper for a man and a woman to be together at this time," he spoke, trying his best to hide the little stutters due to his nervousness.

Bai Yiqing blinked. She then smirked at him teasingly. "Don't worry. I'm not going to attack you. Or are you going to attack me?"

"Maiden Bai!" Qingheng Jun gasped.

"I would give consent but we haven't prostrated to each other and you seem to be a man of tradition."

Qingheng Jun spluttered and nearly fell back from shock. He was aware that he had a good standing and had received attention from both genders ever since he had grown into an adult, but he was not used to being teased like this, nor could his heart stay calm when the other was someone he was very much attracted to.

Bai Yiqing only laughed seeing how his normally composed face became as red as a ripe tomato. "Alright, alright. I will come again to deliver breakfast tomorrow morning, so make sure you go to bed straight away after this, okay?"

Qingheng Jun cleared his throat. "You don't really have to do that..."

Bai Yiqing shook her head. "I want to. You helped and supported me when I was down. I want to support you as well."

Qingheng Jun's eyes lit up and Bai Yiqing could not help chuckling again.

It would still be a long road before she could confidently call it love. However, if there was one thing she was certain about, it was that falling for this man wouldn't be a bad thing at all.

"What do you mean?"

Lan Qiren's hand had long stopped moving the pestle. His face had become deathly pale. How much did Wen Ruohan hear?

Wei Changze pursed his lips. "Perhaps we should move this conversation elsewhere."

The three moved to Lan Qiren's room which was thankfully unaffected by the fire, yet the anxiety he was experiencing was almost akin to the moments before the Wens attacked. Wen Ruohan heard them.

Wen Ruohan crossed his arms. His eyes looked at them sharply. "So?"

Wei Changze glanced at Lan Qiren's face that had lost all colours and decided to speak first, "Young Master Wen, what if I say the three of us were never supposed to get to know each other in this time?"

Wen Ruohan was perplexed. ".... What?"

"Young Master Wen, do you believe in time travel?"

For a moment Wen Ruohan appeared bewildered. He looked at the two in disbelief, which was understandable of course. Time travel was not something that had never been brought up, most people had regrets that they wished they could fix. However, even cultivators generally agreed that going back in time was an impossible feat to achieve. Only Wei Wuxian of course kept trying and attempting to do the unthinkable.

Lan Qiren took a deep breath. He had to explain this, there was no choice. "Sit down. This may take long."

There was a momentary silence. Wen Ruohan stared intently at Lan Qiren.

The young master of Gusu Lan clenched his fists and gathered his courage, before he finally confessed, "I'm a lot older than you think. My mind, that is."

Wen Ruohan blinked. "I'm already aware you're more mature than people your age."

Lan Qiren shook his head. "No, that's not what I mean. I came... from the future. I have memories of a future that was supposed to happen, but never did."

He started by talking about how he had a nephew-in-law, who was also Wei Changze's son, who was a genius inventor. He told Wen Ruohan of how the time travel spell accidentally sent him to the past, where a change in his heart - his decision to follow Jiang Fengmian and the others to go fishing that day led to his meeting with Wen Ruohan, when in his original timeline they were never supposed to meet - not until he was forced to take over leadership after Qingheng Jun entered seclusion.

Wen Ruohan frowned. "Why would Sect Leader Lan enter seclusion?"

"In my time, you and I weren't investigating Wen Lin's death and Xue Yanzi together. You rescued A Zhao alone, I was never there with you. You went back to Qishan and married the woman arranged by your father. Nobody saw Maiden Bai protecting my brother, nobody knew about the body possession. Uncle Lan Fan died right then and there, she surrendered herself and was confined to the day of her death," he explained.

He went on to add more relevant details of how things changed from thereon. How Wen Ruohan had somehow changed from the man he knew today, to the ruthless leader who mercilessly slaughtered so many people and sent his sons to eliminate all the smaller sects who dared to defy them. He told him of how the sects eventually decided to band together and took down the entire Qishan Wen Sect, of how even the healer branch of Wen Clan in Dafan Mountain also had to suffer and were hunted down.

Wen Ruohan fell silent. Looking at the disbelief in his face, Lan Qiren could not blame him. If back then someone told him that his own brother would abandon the clan for a woman and left him to shoulder the burden he wouldn't believe it. Back when he was raising Xichen and Wangji, he never thought they would suffer similar fates as their parents as well.

"How many people died?" Wen Ruohan suddenly asked.

Lan Qiren licked his dry lips. "A lot. Yunmeng Jiang at the end of the war had... three survivors. Cloud Recesses was completely burned to the ground. Your own clan too, was decimated, leaving only one survivor."

He neglected to mention that of the three survivors from Yunmeng Jiang, two died a few years later (albeit one was revived), while the remaining Wen Clan member was adopted by Lan Clan, leaving the Wen Clan with no successor to carry the name at all.

"I have a theory that either the Yin Iron corrupted your mind, or you were possessed by your father, the same way Chang Ran's body was initially possessed by Xue Yanzi. Except that in your case, it may have been a successful possession due to the close blood relations," said Wei Changze. "It would explain the massive change in your personality in the future."

Wen Ruohan stared blankly at his own hands. "Then, when Young Master Wei mentioned seducing me..."

"We wanted to keep you on our side, to make sure you will not obtain the Yin Iron, or at least find out what caused the change and help stop it," Wei Changze admitted. "It was my idea. Second Young Master Lan was not fond of resorting to that tactic."

Wen Ruohan drummed his fingers against the table. A bitter smile formed on his lips and he suddenly laughed. "Of course. Of course you wouldn't like it. Why would..."

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "I didn't start befriending you solely because of that. I..."

He did not stay with Wen Ruohan, perform the three bows, or let Wen Ruohan touch his body just for that purpose. While his initial purpose of following Wen Ruohan after their third meeting may have been motivated by his desire to change the future, his feelings were no longer the same as back then. Lan Qiren knew that for certain.

Wen Ruohan's lips were set in a straight, grim line. "You could have just killed me, you know? If all three of four major sects work together against us before all pieces of the relic were collected, with a crumbling leadership we would eventually fall."

"But that's not what I want," Lan Qiren argued. "I know not all of Qishan Wen are bad. Moreover, how can I even attack someone on the basis of something they haven't even done yet?"

"Second Young Master, you really are too good for me, aren't you?"

Lan Qiren went stiff.

Wen Ruohan rose and held his breath. "Pardon me, but I may need some time to myself. Sleep well, you two."

The door creaked ever so slightly as it closed. Lan Qiren clutched on the white fabric on his lap. His shoulders trembled.

Wei Changze looked down. "I'm sorry, Second Young Master."

"... He's hurt," Lan Qiren muttered. "Have I betrayed his trust?"

Wei Changze nodded. "It can't be helped that he will be hurt. He will need some time to process his thoughts." After all, Lan Qiren's initial intention of getting close to him aside, Wen Ruohan may be more shocked to hear about all the atrocities that he supposedly would do in the future without their intervention. "However, I believe he knows the sincerity of your feelings."

"How?"

A smile formed on Wei Changze's face. "Second Young Master's forehead ribbon is still on his wrist. Don't think I didn't notice it."

Lan Qiren's face turned from pale blue to crimson red as he just realized he had been going around without his forehead ribbon on. His forehead ribbon, that was still tied around Wen Ruohan's wrist. He suddenly felt almost like he was naked without the familiar fabric on his forehead.

"Too bad I wasn't there to see the proposal and pass down the tale of-"

"Shut up!"

Qishan Wen had rejected Wen Rongzhi as the new leader. They instead chose to spread rumours that Sect Leader Wen had long planned to take advantage of his power and position to create chaos and terrorize other sects. The 'righteous and honourable' Wen Ruohan however chose to uphold justice and rebelled against his father. Unfortunately, in the middle of requesting assistance from Gusu Lan, Sect Leader Wen had forced his way into Cloud Recesses to stop the alliance, leaving Wen Ruohan with no choice but to take away the leadership.

They all knew despite the rumours, it wasn't that Qishan Wen was forgiving Wen Ruohan's initial plan for defection, nor were they supporting him completely. After the fall of the late Sect Leader Wen, the elders and senior cultivators simply realized that without a strong and charismatic leader, Qishan Wen was in danger of being toppled, should the other four major sects decide to go against them. Wen Rongzhi, despite his 'obedience' to the elders, were

neither talented nor impressionable. Their other option would be Wen Ruoyu, who was loyal to Wen Ruohan anyway.

All this time the Wen elders had been arrogant and under the impression that smaller sects would never dare to go against them. Perhaps their former leader's death had made them realize that they weren't completely infallible. In order to preserve their sect, they had no choice but to swallow their pride and accept everything. The very following day after the battle in Cloud Recesses, carts filled with treasures, rare herbs, as well as money were sent to Gusu as compensation. A letter signed by the elders requesting for pardoning of the disciples involved as well as bodies of the dead cultivators were also included.

Qingheng Jun did not plan on pardoning the Wen prisoners easily. After all, his home was wrecked and his people had died. However, he also wasn't keen on cruel penalties. A meeting with the elders concluded that since the leader in charge of the attack was already killed, the sect members involved with the attack should be able to be released after ten whips, as well as hard labour of ten years to help the common people, upon returning home. Wen Ruohan was spared from the punishment since he wasn't on the enemy's side during the battle and had even contributed to defending the Gusu Lan members, but he still offered to take any penalty, which Qingheng Jun had yet to decide.

However, the penalties regarding the enemy, frankly, was not Qingheng Jun's utmost concern at the moment.

"Second Young Master Lan should be punished. He has initiated the fight and committed immoralities that brought us to this predicament," the elders chimed.

Qingheng Jun was about to voice his objection, but Lan Qiren shook his head and remained silent. Qingheng Jun pressed his temples, feeling the throbbing headaches. The meeting hall was silent save for the sound of pouring rain but the glares directed towards his younger brother was painfully obvious.

If Lan Qiren had not brought Wen Ruohan to Cloud Recesses, indeed they would not be targeted. However, Qingheng Jun felt that saying his brother was responsible for the damage would be too cruel and ridiculous. Everyone knew he did not bring back Wen Ruohan or Zhao Wu with the intention to lure Sect Leader Wen. In fact, none of them expected Sect Leader Wen to come with an army of cultivators all ready to attack straight away after discovering the plot.

"Qiren, we need you to report all findings you have during your whole time together out there," said Qingheng Jun. "I'm sure there is a reason behind your actions."

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "Xiongzhang, how can I make excuses for this?"

"You are not making an excuse. However, I do not believe you have the malicious intent of making your home a target."

"Sect Leader!" The elders argued. "Even if he is your younger brother, you must not be lenient. Favouritism is forbidden."

"Punishment should be just and everyone has the right to undergo a proper trial to defend themselves. The fight was initiated by the previous Sect Leader Wen, not the youngsters," Qingheng Jun stated, a little irked by now. Lenient? When had he been lenient on his younger brother? Even Qiren was very strict on himself. If Qingheng Jun was lenient, Lan Qiren would not even be here, judged by the elders for something he could not control.

Lan Qiren bowed down. "Qiren admits his mistake. I was rash. Driven by personal emotions, I rushed to save someone important to me without thinking of a backup plan. I did infiltrate into the Nightless City, pretending to be the bride in order to save him," he paused, then added, "But I have never wanted this to happen to our sect. I saved Zhao Wu because he does not deserve to be tortured and imprisoned."

The elders' faces turned sour again as they recalled Lan Qiren's declaration prior to the battle, which had him wrapping his forehead ribbon around Wen Ruohan's wrist right in front of everyone.

"You're still not explaining how you know about that one prisoner and why you actually choose to save him," one elder suddenly interjected.

Before Lan Qiren could continue to speak, there was suddenly a knock on the door. Lan Qiren's eyes widened.

Wen Ruohan entered with a confident stride and sat next to him. He bowed his head down to greet the elders, then nonchalantly met their eyes as he stated, "Even without my presence here or Second Young Master Lan's provocation, Qishan Wen will still be coming to attack."

His declaration was met with stunned gasps from all the elders, as well as Qingheng Jun himself.

"My father has long stated his desire to exert control over the entire cultivation world. So much that he has started collecting and learning to manipulate Yin Iron," Wen Ruohan boldly stated.

Lan Qiren gawked and looked at Wen Ruohan in disbelief. What was he doing? Why would he reveal that? Admitting that his sect, which had just lost their previous leader, was in the possession of a highly coveted and dangerous relic was not a wise move. Either he would be asked to hand it over, or Qishan Wen would be accused of planning yet another attack and threatening others.

Judging from the elders' and Qingheng Jun's faces, Lan Qiren could already guess that it was not something they were pleased to hear.

"Not only that, the man whom he captured possesses knowledge of dangerous, deadly techniques that he planned to utilize. Zhao Wu may even be aware of the location of another Yin Iron piece as well. Rescuing the man and bringing him back is the correct decision to make, if you do not wish more harm to come in the future," Wen Ruohan added. "In short, as careless as we were, everything we did was just to avoid a possible worse outcome."

Qingheng Jun's face paled. Even the elders were now beginning to exchange small, quiet murmurs and whispers.

"An attack on Gusu Lan is inevitable, as horrible as it sounds. Without Zhao Wu here, without the other young masters of other clans who lent their help, the clan may suffer from even more casualties. I believe pushing the blame to Second Young Master Lan, when in fact he has had a bigger insight on the crisis, is unreasonable," Wen Ruohan stated firmly.

"You..." Lan Qiren paused.

He didn't have a bigger insight. He quite literally had seen the future. There was nothing to prove that whatever happened was a better outcome.

Qingheng Jun's lips were set in a firm line. He exhaled. "Qiren and Young Master...no, Sect Leader Wen, please wait for a moment outside while we discuss the verdict."

"Why did you do that?"

Wen Ruohan shrugged. "Do what?"

"Defending me. Putting yourself and your sect to blame. Just trusting everything I said-"

"RenRen, the people involved are going to get punished anyway. My father is dead, the Yin Iron will be sealed, but at least you're going to be safe. My RenRen shouldn't have an inch of his skin marred with scars," Wen Ruohan said, looking at Lan Qiren's cheek. The scar from the battle had faded but it still made him furious just remembering the injury.

Lan Qiren stilled. Heat crept up his face and he could feel tears threatening to spill.

"You..."

"Yes, me."

"You're calling me that again. That ridiculous nickname."

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. "Still mad at the nickname, RenRen?"

Lan Qiren bit his lower lip. His eyes were stinging. "I thought... you would be mad at me..."

He thought he would never hear the foolish nickname spoken with that foolish grin and carefree voice, ever again. He thought he had lost Wen Ruohan's trust. He did not even get to apologize yet, why was he being forgiven already?

Wen Ruohan's expression softened and he cupped the younger male's cheek, gently wiping the tears that were forming at the corner of his eyes with his thumb. "Well, I am mad at you for

not telling me this sooner. But you know, RenRen... your heart can't lie at all."

Lan Qiren huffed. A small chuckle escaped his throat which he quickly masked as a cough. "Shut up."

Wen Ruohan laughed. He did not miss the chuckle. "Also, it was hard to believe anything you've done - at least when you were sober - was seduction. Could have tried harder, RenRen."

"I wasn't trying to seduce you!" Lan Qiren argued, his face flaming red.

"I know, I know. You're lucky your face did most of the job, RenRen. With the way you treated me so coldly in the beginning, you make the worst honey trap-"

His words were stopped by a pair of lips crashing against his own. Lan Qiren tugged on the red fabric and pulled Wen Ruohan towards him, meeting his lips without hesitation. Wen Ruohan was stumped with surprise for the first three seconds, but proceeded to accept the kiss delightfully and wrapped his hands around Lan Qiren's neck to deepen the kiss.

They finally parted from the need to breathe, and Lan Qiren looked at him, his expression feigning aggressiveness while licking his lips. "Have I seduced you now?"

Wen Ruohan failed to stop himself from looking at his lips, now red and slightly puffy from the long kiss. "Hm, not enough," he smirked, leaning in for another.

Lan Qiren closed his eyes and savoured the feelings of warm lips melding against each other. Their breaths intermingled and he rested his palms against the broad chest.

"Ehem."

Qingheng Jun cleared his throat and Lan Qiren instantly pushed Wen Ruohan away, sending him flying a good few metres away with his Gusu Lan-approved arm strength.

"This is the hallway, you two," Qingheng Jun reminded them.

Lan Qiren could feel his ears burning from embarrassment. Wen Ruohan whined as he got up after being pummeled to the wall.

"... I was wrong, Xiongzhang," Lan Qiren uttered.

"What? You can't call that wrong, RenRen!" Wen Ruohan complained.

"Shut up," Lan Qiren hissed.

"Excessive public display of affection is forbidden in Cloud Recesses," Qingheng Jun said. "It would be nice if you could go through the rules once, especially since you have my brother's forehead ribbon wrapped around your wrist, Sect Leader Wen."

Lan Qiren bowed down. He still had yet to apologize to his older brother for technically eloping and getting married without his permission. Regardless of his motives and the

outcomes, he did break the rules. “The verdict, Xiongzhong?”

Wen Ruohan fell silent. He waited nervously for Qingheng Jun to speak as well.

The Gusu Lan leader paused. He sighed. “We had some discussions and negotiations. Your punishment has been decided.”

Wen Ruohan scowled. “He’s still going to be punished? After everything?”

“Silence,” Lan Qiren whispered, though his voice was slightly trembling from fear. He clenched his fists. He would accept the discipline whip. He could accept kneeling for days. What he feared the most, however, was isolation and seclusion.

He did not want to be separated. From *him*. From everyone.

Qingheng Jun took a deep breath.

“Five years of banishment from Cloud Recesses.”

Chapter End Notes

we have one chapter and one extra left! OwO

A bond that will never break (NSFW)

Chapter Notes

Me last chapter: huehue banishment >:3c

Everyone: HONEYMOON!!

Me: ... well they found out quickly

This chapter contains NSFW scenes (°з°)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Cangse Sanren pouted. “What a shame. I’ve barely been here and only got to attend a few classes, now they’re asking all students to return?”

“Can’t help it. You can always come again next year if you want to,” Jiang Fengmian said.

Due to the damage done to the Cloud Recesses, the sect was now recovering from their losses and would be entering a period of mourning for the loved ones who unfortunately had died protecting their home. Instead of a full year, lessons had to be cut short. Disciples were informed that they would be returning to their respective sects and were welcomed to attend the following year, if they wanted.

While some of the disciples were planning to come back the following year, heirs of large clans like Nie Yizhou, Jiang Fengmian and Wei Changze had been away from their homes for eight months. It was unlikely that their sects would send them out to study there again, though their alliance with Gusu Lan would continue to remain strong from now on. Perhaps even stronger, now that the sect heirs and young masters had bonded over their short adventures together.

Cangse Sanren and several other guest disciples unfortunately had joined later than everyone, hence they only managed to attend very few lessons. She sighed as she packed her writing tools. “Now I have to look for another place to stay.”

“You can’t go back to your shifu?” Wei Changze asked.

She shook her head. “It’s the rules. Once a disciple leaves, they can never return. I made my decision to leave and explore the world, I can’t go back.”

Originally after receiving the invitation, she had planned to stay at Gusu for the year and slowly get used to the world outside the mountains. While Qingheng Jun did state that she could stay a little longer if she needed to, Cangse Sanren just did not want to trouble them,

when she knew Gusu Lan was still in the process of recovering and grieving. Also, it wouldn't be as fun anyway without the friends she had just made.

"Ah..." Wei Changze uttered. He paused, pondering to himself.

Jiang Fengmian noticed his friend's expression. He smiled, then turned to Cangse Sanren. "Do you want to come and stay with us at Lotus Pier then?"

Wei Changze turned to him, looking surprised. Really, Jiang Fengmian wanted to laugh because it was so obvious that Wei Changze was reluctant to part with her but was unable to voice it - either because he was unsure of his own feelings or he did not want to possibly offend Jiang Fengmian. He should have yet another talk with Wei Changze to remind him that he thought of him as his best friend, not just another servant.

Cangse Sanren's eyes lit up. "Really? Nice, now I don't have to think about where to stay!"

Yu Ziyuan rolled her eyes, leaning against the wall. "Did you really just leave your shifu and came here with nothing?"

"I thought I would have a place to stay for the entire year, then go and travel around the continent after that," Cangse Sanren grumbled.

"Reckless. You really don't think much, where do you plan to go after mooching off from Yunmeng Jiang? You can't possibly just keep traveling forever," Yu Ziyuan lectured. She then looked away, avoiding her direction. "Well, if you need a place to stay for a week or two, Meishan Yu isn't too bad. We could let you in as long as you mind your manners."

A large grin formed on Cangse Sanren's face and she immediately pounced at Yu Ziyuan, beaming. "Yu Jiejie! I knew it, you secretly adore this meimei, don't you?"

"I do not! Get off!"

"Aww, come on..."

"Stop touching me or I'll break your arms!"

"How many times have you threatened me with that again? Ten times?"

While the two ladies continued their one-sided bickering, Bai Yiqing came into the classroom. She smiled at the young cultivators and bowed down. "It's only been a short time, but I am truly indebted to all of you."

"Maiden Bai!" Cangse Sanren released Yu Ziyuan from her deadlock-hug and went to greet her. "Please don't, you're older than us and we have done nothing much."

"You saved my shidi, I couldn't be more grateful," said Bai Yiqing.

"How is Zhao Wu?" Wei Changze asked, putting away the writing tools he had just packed.

A sad smile appeared on her face.

Zhao Wu was still in bed, the injuries on his body would be taking a few more days until he could recover. He was already awake, but Bai Yiqing had a feeling - judging from the way he was either constantly in a daze or looking out the window with longing eyes - that the pain in his heart would never heal.

“He plans to go to Huanying Village to see Wen Lin’s grave as soon as he’s healed. Perhaps look for Xiao Ba, if she still wants to come back to us,” said Bai Yiqing, referring to the other child who was rescued with Zhao Liu but refused to come with Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren.

Wei Changze looked down. He suddenly now remembered that back in Huanying Village, the spirit of the rogue cultivator - which by now they had identified as Wen Lin - had split into fragments. One remained in the lake and was cleansed, while the other fragment that had cultivated into the doppelganger demon was sealed in the spirit-trapping pouch and now contained within Gusu Lan.

Perhaps he could ask Qingheng Jun later to let Zhao Wu have a look at the pouch. The resentful fragmented spirit may have lost its clarity of mind, but just maybe... maybe if Zhao Wu was there, the spirit could pass on without the need to purify it forcefully.

“What about you, Maiden Bai?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

“I will be staying here... to support Sect Leader Lan,” she said. “Sect Leader Lan has been by my side the whole time. I want to help him this time. Especially with what’s going on with his younger brother now, he will need all the help he can use.”

“What? What is happening to Second Young Master Lan?” Nie Yizhou asked.

“They’re not going to punish him, right?” Cangse Sanren asked, scowling. “It’s not his fault at all! If he has to be punished, then the rest of us all deserve punishment too!”

Bai Yiqing sighed. “The verdict has already been announced. All we can do now is to help him to prepare for his life hereon. I have helped Sect Leader Lan prepare the necessary items, perhaps the rest of you can also assist, if you're willing of course.”

Wei Changze frowned. “Maiden Bai, what is his punishment?”

Bai Yiqing’s head was tilted down and her shoulders were shaking. “It’s.... horrible. I can’t believe Sect Leader Lan would do that to his own brother. I fear his brother may not be able to get out of bed, or walk properly after this.”

Cangse Sanren gasped in horror. “Can’t walk... are they going to beat him up? Give him the discipline whip? No!”

Bai Yiqing coughed. “Do you all agree to help?”

“Of course!” Jiang Fengmian answered firmly. “Even if we must protest to the elders, even if we get scolded by our families, we will do it. Second Young Master Lan doesn’t deserve that kind of harsh punishment.”

Bai Yiqing smiled. “Good. Gather up here, I need all of you to listen carefully and not spoil this.”

“Are you sure you’re not coming with us, Zhao Wu?” Wen Ruohan asked.

Zhao Wu shook his head. “Thank you for the invitation, Sect Leader Wen. However, Qingheng Jun has told me about the spirit pouch and A Lin’s grave. I will go there after A Lin’s soul can be put to rest properly.”

Wen Ruohan exhaled. Since Zhao Wu was married to his brother, he had wanted to bring him back and take care of him. Even though they managed to rescue him, they could not bring back the vigor that Zhao Wu had lost. At this rate, Zhao Wu may not live long enough to see A Zhao as a grown adult. There was nothing they could do if Zhao Wu himself refused treatment and honestly, Wen Ruohan could somehow understand him.

Zhao Wu could not throw his life away because Wen Lin would hate it. Yet, he could not bear living alone any longer either.

“You are A Lin’s spouse. You don’t have to refer to me like that,” said Wen Ruohan. “A Lin may have left the Wen Clan, but he is still my brother.”

A small weak smile formed on Zhao Wu’s face. “Please take care of Xiao Liu... brother-in-law.”

At the gate, A Zhao was already waiting with Lan Qiren. Wen Ruohan blinked. “Have you said your goodbye, RenRen?”

Lan Qiren turned. He was wearing plain white robes, without any emblems or the cloud motifs. His forehead ribbon was still tied around Wen Ruohan’s waist. “I’ve said my farewell to my brother and Maiden Bai. There is nothing else left to do.”

“What about your classmates? Our friends?” Wen Ruohan asked.

“I’m just not allowed to stay here. It’s not like I can’t see them ever again,” said Lan Qiren. Truthfully he did look for them earlier just to say his goodbye, but they were nowhere to be found and Lan Qiren did not want to make it seem like he was reluctant to leave and accept the banishment. Without even giving one last look at Cloud Recesses, he turned and walked away. “Let’s go.”

The longer they stalled, the more awkward Lan Qiren would feel.

The three finally set off, Qishan being their destination. Lan Qiren had nothing with him, other than a change of clothes, some personal items that his brother allowed him to take, as well as his sword and qin. His entry pass was taken away. His Gusu Lan robes were taken

away. Until five years were over, he would not be allowed to step into Cloud Recesses, with the exceptions of emergencies or early pardoning.

His current life added with his past life, he had spent several decades in Gusu - majority of his time being dedicated to raising his nephews and teaching young disciples. Leaving for an extended period of time had never once crossed his mind, especially since he was a man, and he had never expected to marry into another family (in fact, he never even thought of getting married before). Yet, here he was, following another man, whom he had somehow gotten involved with, along with a child, who now technically could be considered their adopted child.

For as long as he could remember, none of the Gusu Lan disciples had ever been banished. Even for the most serious crimes, they were either struck with the discipline whip or kicked out of the sect completely. Now...

“RenRen, the meals at Nightless City aren't as bland as the ones in Cloud Recesses. I can ask the cook to prepare more vegetable dishes, but you can still eat meat outside of Cloud Recesses, right?” Wen Ruohan asked.

Lan Qiren nodded. “I can.” Meat was prohibited in Cloud Recesses, but for convenience the rules did not apply outside, since cultivators may have to procure their own food while going on a long night hunt.

“Our bodies aren't too different in size. You can wear my clothes first. A Zhao too, can wear my childhood clothes. We'll get new outfits tailored for both of you later.”

“Qishan Wen still needs to rebuild, you just spent a lot on compensation for Gusu Lan, don't waste more money than necessary,” Lan Qiren said.

A Zhao nodded. “I don't mind wearing Han Ge's old clothes. Han Ge has nice clothes.”

Wen Ruohan grinned. “I have nice tastes, don't I, A Zhao? Whether in fashion or in choice of partner.”

“Just what are you teaching the child?!” Lan Qiren berated him.

“I'm praising you, what are you mad for?”

“You're praising yourself, what nonsense are you saying?”

He was supposed to feel ashamed. He was supposed to reflect. Yet, leaving his home now felt more like going on just yet another trip. It even felt almost liberating. He thought he would miss Cloud Recesses. Back when it was burned in his original timeline, Lan Qiren recalled wanting to go back so badly. Now?

He had five years to himself, five years to do what he wanted. Sure, he might miss his brother. He might not get used to the different sceneries or the different beds. Food was something he needed to adjust his taste bud to. It would take some time to get used to seeing more red instead of white.

However, when Lan Qiren thought about everything he could have, five years away from home was a very small price to pay.

The fact that he could be sent away from home, was because his brother was there, leading the sect and not in seclusion. His future sister-in-law was there to support him in his place. Their relationship was developing naturally, they were not forced to separate. Xichen and Wangji would have their mother with them, all the time. Well, not being the primary guardian for his two nephews might be a little lonely, but still, it was a lot better for they would have both parents with them.

It might sound strange, but Lan Qiren now realized that it was a good thing that he was not urgently needed in Cloud Recesses. He didn't have to be there, because his brother and sister-in-law were around. Qishan Wen was no longer a threat. He actually had done something. Things were actually changing for the better.

He changed something, and it was a good change.

"You're spacing out, RenRen. What are you thinking about?" Wen Ruohan asked.

A rare, small chuckle escaped Lan Qiren's and Wen Ruohan was stunned.

"Nothing. Just thinking about my brother and Maiden Bai."

Wen Ruohan smiled. "Missing home already, RenRen? You know I could have taken some beatings if it's for you, RenRen."

"Don't be silly. We just left," Lan Qiren said. "And don't act like you're not happy about this, when you're grinning this wide."

Wen Ruohan pouted. "I'm happy that you're coming with me. I'm not happy with the way you're being treated. I wish we could be together because of you, not because of the elders."

Lan Qiren wished he could have something to shield his face, just because his face was too thin for this. Yet, he wanted to say it. He looked to the side, away from Wen Ruohan's face, before uttering, "I would have followed you even without the punishment. There are so many places in this world I could have gone to, but Qishan is where you'll be."

"RenRen..." Wen Ruohan's gaze and voice softened. "I really want to kiss you now."

"Have some shame and shut your mouth, we have a child here," Lan Qiren snapped.

"I can close my eyes," A Zhao offered.

Wen Ruohan's eyes lit up and he casually leaned in towards his partner, but Lan Qiren grimaced and pushed his face away. Wen Ruohan however sneakily used the chance to kiss and lick his palm instead.

Lan Qiren gasped and blushed furiously. "Wen Ruohan!"

Wen Ruohan laughed, hastening his steps and evading Lan Qiren who was chasing him angrily. A Zhao giggled as he watched the two adults running and bickering like children. He quickened his steps as well to follow them. “Han Ge, Ren Ge, wait for me!”

Entering Nightless City this time no longer felt as scary or nerve-wrecking as before. Lan Qiren thought about how funny it was that this was not the first time he was actually coming here, but it was in fact the first time he was being welcomed in. There was no fear or worry of being caught by the enemies. It felt so weird, knowing he was now coming in as a family member, in fact.

Family member, his heart skipped a beat as he repeated the words in his mind. Too bad their ‘marriage’ wasn’t quite proper or ideal, and might even be questioned. Perhaps one day, if Wen Ruohan was willing, they could plan another ceremony...

Lan Qiren followed Wen Ruohan into the main hall. He bumped against Wen Ruohan and was about to question why Wen Ruohan suddenly stopped moving, when he finally saw the inside of the hall as well.

The entire hall was decorated in red, not too different from Wen Ruohan’s first wedding ceremony. There were red curtains and banners, flowers and petals scattered, with the family altar and other ceremonial items all ready. The only difference was instead of the close Wen Clan members, the guests in attendance consisted of Qingheng Jun and Bai Yiqing, Wen Ruoyu and his family, Jiang Fengmian, Wei Changze, Cangse Sanren, Yu Ziyuan, and Nie Yizhou. Lan Qiren even spotted several other young cultivators from Yunmeng Jiang and Qinghe Nie as well.

“What... what is this?” Wen Ruohan gasped, evident that this was not something he planned.

Qingheng Jun smiled. “Do you think I will allow my brother to leave home without a proper ceremony? Unless it is a wedding planned by me, it isn’t acceptable.”

“Xiongzhang...” Lan Qiren gawked. He could not believe it, when did his brother even arrange for everything? “Why are you here? What about the sect? How did you arrive here before me?”

Qingheng Jun shrugged. “I flew, right after you left. You are banned from entering Cloud Recesses, but there is no rule banning me to come see you. The sect will be fine without me for a couple days. I have to make sure the dowry arrives safely.”

“Dowry?!” Lan Qiren gasped.

“Good thing Qishan Wen were sending plenty of things in those carts. We Gusu Lan are not picky, those treasures and medications make fine wedding gifts,” Qingheng Jun hummed.

“Maiden Bai helped me to pack and bring the dowry, the young masters and ladies all worked hard to decorate this place.”

So that was why they were not around. Lan Qiren thought they had left early and found it quite odd that Jiang Fengmian or Wei Changze at least did not come to say their farewell.

Wen Ruoyu nodded. “Well, those salty elders aren’t attending the wedding and your little brother is still sulking from losing his chance to become the sect leader, but he did give me permission to come in and decorate the hall. The banquet is better off without them anyway.”

“Now all we need is for the groom and bride to change!” Cangse Sanren cheered. “Good thing we were able to get back the wedding dresses.”

Nie Yizhou grinned and showed a pair of red shoes to Lan Qiren. “And this time I got you the right shoes, Second Young Master Lan.”

Qingheng Jun wasted no more time to push Lan Qiren to a different room to change. The wedding outfit prepared was in fact the same one Lan Qiren had worn before, except that there were some adjustments made to fit him better. He also noticed additional patterns on the fabric, sewn on the sleeves and collar.

“We didn’t have time to make a completely new dress, but Maiden Bai helped redesign it,” said Qingheng Jun as he helped Lan Qiren getting into the elaborate outfit. He paused to stare at his brother with a melancholic expression. “You deserve better than this.”

Lan Qiren shook his head. “You have no idea how happy I am now, Xiongzhang.”

Qingheng Jun sighed. “No matter how much you like him, you could at least pretend to be sad that you’re leaving home, Qiren...”

“That’s not what I mean, Xiongzhang!” Lan Qiren quickly said and shook his head, as if to chase away the heat accumulating in his face. “Things could have gone worse. Perhaps I have indeed brought disaster to Cloud Recesses. Yet, being exiled made me realize something. I can afford to leave Cloud Recesses because you are here. My sister-in-law is there to help and not being wrongfully punished. If I didn’t follow Wen Ruohan back then, it wouldn’t have been possible.”

Qingheng Jun only grunted. “You’re teasing me now, Qiren? You’re the one getting married, Maiden Bai hasn’t... umm... we haven’t planned on anything yet.”

She’s choosing to stay with you on her own accord this time, Lan Qiren thought. She came here to help and support you, the same way you’re helping me. "Write me a letter when she becomes your wife, Xiongzhang."

"A letter? As a sect leader I have the authority to let you in for special occasions, don't be silly. Even if you're married, you still have to come and visit me once a year, okay?" Qingheng Jun said.

"Should you really abuse your power like that?"

Qingheng Jun laughed. He smiled and patted his younger brother's head, and Lan Qiren suddenly felt very young and small again.

“My didi is an adult now.”

Lan Qiren choked up a little, though this time there were no more tears.

Perhaps a little, maybe. He never really did get this ‘good farewell’ from his brother in the past life, did he? Before Lan Qiren knew it, he was suddenly forced to grow and take over the leadership as well as raise two young boys. Now his brother was here and he suddenly felt young again.

This time, he chose to show up in his wedding garments without any red veil covering his head. Lan Qiren basked in the sight of Wen Ruohan in red, looking even more handsome than that day. His groom appeared mesmerized as their hands were joined together with the red cloth. It may be embarrassing to have his face exposed, especially with Cangse Sanren making some excited noises and Wei Changze with a gremlin smile at the side. However, he wanted to see Wen Ruohan’s face as they bowed to the heaven and earth together. He wanted Wen Ruohan to look at him, as they bowed together.

Shortly after the ceremony was over, Wen Ruohan whisked him to his - no, their bedroom, not bothering to stay any longer at the banquet. The door closed and he wasted no time to press Lan Qiren against the wall. Warm lips descended on his forehead and Lan Qiren closed his eyes. They stayed in the position for a long moment, just enjoying the feel of being in each other’s embrace. They were not pressed for time. They were not chasing anything other than each other’s body heat. It was a night just for the two of them.

“Aren’t we... going to drink the nuptial wine?” Lan Qiren asked.

Wen Ruohan gently laid his fingers on the soft cheek. The scar from the battle had long gone. There was no frown, no scowl, nothing but softness yet passion waiting to explode on the beautiful face. “I don’t want you drunk tonight. I want you to remember everything. Though...”

“What?”

Wen Ruohan looked a little sheepish. “I was planning to study first, so... it might still not be perfect.”

Oh. Lan Qiren almost forgot that his groom did not really have any experience before him - or at least not with men. Lan Qiren himself was never romantically involved with anyone before, but he had enough knowledge about those things, thanks to a certain loud and shameless man in the future. After the last infiltration mission, Wen Ruohan did not really have time to ‘study’, nor did he have the right materials. “I don’t need you to be perfect. You’re fine as you are.”

“Really?” Wen Ruohan chuckled. He leaned down and Lan Qiren could feel his warm breath against his face. “But I want to match my perfect RenRen.”

The tip of their noses brushed against each other, almost teasingly. Lan Qiren tilted his head up just slightly and met Wen Ruohan's lips. The kiss was gentle, with Wen Ruohan cupping his jaw so tenderly as if he was holding the most precious, fragile treasure in existence. Lan Qiren slowly wrapped his arms around Wen Ruohan's back, feeling the soft silk fabric on his slim fingers.

"I'm not perfect," Lan Qiren murmured in between the long, indulgent kisses.

"But we're perfect together," Wen Ruohan chuckled, this time peppering light pecks on his cheeks and jaw.

"Stop with those embarrassing remarks, Wen Ruohan."

"Tsk, how is your face still this thin when it's just us, RenRen?" He laughed. "We should fix the way you address me, RenRen. It's about time you call me 'husband', don't you think?"

Lan Qiren parted his lips, in his attempt to try saying the word. However, his voice did not come out as he found himself feeling too embarrassed to say it. "Is... is it that important?"

Wen Ruohan hummed. "Well, why not? Unless you want to call me something like Gege..." he paused, then smirked. "Ah, I almost forgot. Since you're mentally older than me, should I be the one calling you Gege instead? Lan Er Gege?"

The image of a certain young man in red ribbon yelling out 'Lan Er Gege' instantly popped into Lan Qiren's head and he grimaced. "Absolutely not."

"Mm. Husband, then. Will my husband please guide this young and inexperienced one?" Wen Ruohan teased.

"... Shameless," Lan Qiren said, but crashed his mouth against Wen Ruohan, this time with more fervour and passion as they tumbled into bed.

Wen Ruohan reciprocated hungrily, rolling on top of his spouse and stripping the red silk off their bodies to leave a trail of kisses from the pale neck to the abdomen. His fingers slid against Lan Qiren's chest, paying special attention to the two pert red pebbles that caused Lan Qiren to writhe and arch his back.

The sparks that he felt were even more electrifying than the first time. Lan Qiren never thought he could actually feel this aroused and this impatient for a skin-to-skin contact, even though they had the entire night to themselves, with no creepy elders stalking outside. He pulled Wen Ruohan's up to gnaw on his lips again and moaned when he felt a certain part of Wen Ruohan rubbing against his hardness. Wen Ruohan too, must be at his limit. He could hear the rapid palpitations of his heart, he could see the lust in his expression, and once Lan Qiren daringly pressed his palm against Wen Ruohan's crotch, the latter let out a guttural gasp.

"Do... do you have any oil?" Lan Qiren exhaled.

There was a bottle of sandalwood oil left strategically on the side table, courtesy of Wen Ruoyu who had likely and correctly guessed what they needed.

Now divested of his clothes completely, Lan Qiren felt a sense of déjà vu, seeing Wen Ruohan pouring the oil onto his hand and feeling the slick in between his legs. There was also excitement, fear, and curiosity, all mixed up together.

It all started with a chance meeting at the river. Or maybe Wei Changze's mad suggestion. Or perhaps Wei Wuxian's crazy invention. Well, Lan Qiren could probably blame Wei Changze ultimately for passing down the genes. The Wei father-and-son duo certainly achieved the impossible - avoiding the war against Qishan Wen and getting the two very unlikely people to marry, to be together.

Wen Ruohan slowly entered him and Lan Qiren could feel the pain. It was... well, painful, but surprisingly not as much as he expected. Perhaps he was overestimating the pain from the loudness of Wei Wuxian's 'cries for mercy' that anyone passing by Jingshi at night unfortunately could hear. Or it could just be the way Wen Ruohan was planting soothing kisses on his forehead to relax him before he finally moved, that made everything better.

And when Wen Ruohan pressed deep inside him, rubbing a certain spot, an absurd amount of pleasure overwhelmed him.

"H... husband."

Wen Ruohan stilled. His eyes widened. "Did you say something?"

Lan Qiren pulled him in for another kiss and bit his shoulder to stop him from speaking.

Maybe if he was in a good mood, he could say it again. There was plenty of time for the two of them from now on, right?

Chapter End Notes

one more chapter left OwO

I debated on whether or not I should just leave it at the wedding and make it sweet and all, but... I suddenly want meat, and I will have my meat

A New Future

Chapter Notes

uurhh finally... writing an ending has to be the most difficult part
o)-<

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Mornings at Cloud Recesses were generally calm, yet it was an unusually busy day for Gusu Lan that day. After all, it was the day of arrival for guest disciples from various clans. This year, the number of guest disciples attending the lectures was higher, for the renowned Qishan Wen was sending their disciples - including the clan heir herself - to join as well. Though for the past three years they had begun sending in some disciples there, it was the first time in centuries since Qishan Wen was sending a sect heir to study outside.

“A Zhan, what are you doing?”

Lan Wangji halted his steps. The teen slowly turned around and nodded to greet the person calling his name. “Mother.”

Bai Yiqing smiled. Her strides were light as she walked towards her son. She wondered why her son was acting unusual, seemingly taking a casual stroll around the front gate early in the morning - not exactly a place where anyone would enjoy a small walk. By this time Lan Wangji usually was either doing chores or getting ready for lessons.

Lan Wangji looked at the ground. “New guest disciples are coming today,” he said.

Bai Yiqing blinked. “Oh, right. I almost forgot,” she said, then grinned and poked her son’s arm. “Hmm? Are you waiting for someone, A Zhan? I do remember letters from a certain someone promising to come study here soon...”

Rose tint appeared on Lan Wangji’s ears but he said nothing. Bai Yiqing only laughed. “Ah, I wonder how tall A Ying is now. Last time we saw him, the two of you were so still so small and still played with ants.”

Lan Wangji pouted a little, not enjoying his mother’s teasing. Bai Yiqing laughed again and patted his back. She understood her son’s feelings, for she missed her old friends as well. When Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren finally got married in a simple ceremony, she had just given birth to Lan Huan and missed the chance to attend the wedding. Since then life as a mother to two boys had taken most of her time. Though her husband was willing to let her take a trip outside, Bai Yiqing did not really feel like leaving all the duties to him - he was already so busy as the sect leader. Most of all, she loved being around her children.

Once in a while, letters and gifts would arrive from Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren, from wherever they had stopped by. Often there would be some drawings and letters that she knew her A Zhan kept safely in his treasure box (even if he refused to admit it). Despite living apart, he certainly took after his uncle in some traits.

She grinned, then pointed at the gate. “Oh look, some have arrived, A Zhan.”

Lan Wangji turned back to the gate, only to be slightly disappointed to see the newly arriving people at the gate were not the one he had been waiting for. Nie Huaisang waved his hand enthusiastically, before panicking as he almost dropped the birdcage hidden under his long sleeve. Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes at the act but switched to a polite smile as soon as he spotted the mother and son pair. Jiang Yanli appeared as lovely as always, inheriting the same gentle smile as her father.

“Welcome, everyone. I’m very glad that all of you have made it here safely,” Bai Yiqing smiled.

“We are very honored to be welcomed by Madam Lan,” Jiang Yanli greeted.

“Are you going to give us the lecture this year, Madam Lan?” Nie Huaisang asked with animated eyes. He had already attended the lecture at Cloud Recesses the previous year, which was taught by Qingheng Jun. Unfortunately he had failed his classes and was sent to learn from Gusu Lan once again.

Bai Yiqing chuckled. “It’s not my turn. This year, all of you are lucky because my brother-in-law will be coming all the way from Qishan to teach you all.”

“Brother-in-law... then the sect leader’s brother... that... Master Lan Qiren??” Nie Huaisang gasped, before his knees began to go weak.

“What’s the big deal?” A disciple of Qinghe Nie asked, whispering to his peer.

“Psst, haven’t you heard of Lan Qiren? He’s known to be the strictest teacher hailing originally from Gusu Lan Sect. It is said that he has never failed to shape any student, no matter how unruly they are. He produces outstanding students and enforces very strict disciplines,” his fellow disciple whispered back.

“Originally from Gusu Lan... and he’s in Qishan now? How?”

“How do you not know about this? Lan Qiren is in fact married to the leader of Qishan Wen, Wen Ruohan!”

“That... that Wen Ruohan?! How?!”

Lan Wangji frowned seeing the young disciples whispering among themselves. “Gossip is forbidden in Cloud Recesses.”

The disciples immediately straightened their backs. Jiang Wanyin muttered something about how Lan Wangji had not changed while Jiang Yanli shook her head and poked her brother gently, reminding him not to talk bad about his friend.

“We’re not that close,” Jiang Wanyin muttered.

Lan Wangji ignored the remark. He did not particularly care. He was only curious about one thing. “Is Wei Ying... not coming with you?”

Jiang Yanli chuckled a little and decided to answer before her brother could start fuming. She still remembered very vividly of how A Cheng and Lan Wangji had fought for their turn to play with A Xian, back when the Wei family and Lan family both came to celebrate A Cheng’s fifth birthday. “A Xian mentioned in a letter that he’s coming. You know him, he may come at an unpredictable hour.”

“That’s too bad, A Zhan has been waiting for him to come since this morning,” Bai Yiqing sighed, ignoring her son’s betrayed look of having been exposed and Jiang Wanyin’s visible urge to get into a fight. “Oh my, where are my manners? Let’s not stand at the gate any longer. A Zhan, why don’t you wait here for more guests to come a little longer? I will show the guest disciples the way to their quarters.”

He had lived this life once before, yet Lan Qiren still could not help feeling a little nervous. No, perhaps he could not really say that he had lived this life now. Even though some things remained the same, a lot of things had in fact changed. Just this morning, he woke up feeling quite empty as he opened his eyes to seeing nothing but the walls of his old room.

In his old life, he would simply proceed to his daily routine as usual. In this new life, he could not help clutching on the sheets, missing the warmth of certain someone whom he usually shared a bed with. Lan Qiren had always thought he would be fine alone, yet after learning the warmth and comfort of waking up with someone, he didn’t know what he would do now if he ever lost that person.

He shook away all the negative thoughts and left the bed to get ready. While meditating, he could already hear noises from outside - and soon recognized one of them being Nie Huaisang’s voice. It was followed by Jiang Wanyin’s youthful voice criticizing Nie Huaisang for complaining about not being taught by the kind and beautiful Madam Lan. Then came the voice of another boy, one who in his previous timeline had brought Lan Qiren to this new day and new life. The boy who had attempted and achieved the impossible. Well, him and his father.

“Wei-xiong, I haven’t seen you for years!”

“Nie-xiong, I thought you already came here last year?”

“Ehehe.... I failed the classes...”

“You couldn’t even pass Qingheng Jun’s classes, how are you going to pass Lan Qiren’s classes?”

“If I had known Lan Qiren would be teaching this year, I would have waited next year to come back, Jiang-xiong! I thought it would be Qingheng Jun again, or maybe even Madam Lan!”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “As if your brother is going to let you do that.”

“Ha, as long as I can coax my father a bit...”

Lan Qiren could not help feeling quite amazed. Just hearing the conversation outside felt almost unreal, as if all the horrendous things that happened before was a dream. He knew it wasn't a dream though, because some things remained the same. Nie Yizhou's first wife still passed away and he married his second wife, who indeed was Nie Huaisang's mother (Lan Qiren still remembered Yu Ziyuan and Cangse Sanren trying so hard not to laugh when they realized they had met the lady before and remembered their infiltration mission, where the three men had dressed up as young maidens. Nie Yizhou made a remark of what a funny coincidence it was).

Nie Yizhou did not pass away as young as he did in the past, but he was already showing signs of experiencing minor but frequent qi deviations, and Lan Qiren still could not quite figure out the core reason or the right solution to that. Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan still bickered once in a while, but there were no rumors of an illegitimate child nor any gossip of a bad marriage. The last time Lan Qiren visited Lotus Pier, he could see the young Jiang Wanyin playing with his three dogs - still named Princess, Love, and Jasmine, though.

The dogs were there, but Wei Wuxian wasn't. He was with his parents, who had survived the night hunt that was supposed to kill them nine years ago.

Lan Qiren wasn't exactly sure what killed Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren, all he knew was that little Wei Ying was left at the streets of Yiling after his parents' death - a fact he learned from Wangji in the past timeline. Though Lan Qiren had warned Wei Changze about the future, he still could not help feeling worried, and ended up going to Yiling to search for the family. As it turned out, the town at the time was having trouble with a series of killings caused by a rampant demonic beast. Somehow, the Wei family still ended up in that part of the town at the wrong time and they still could not just ignore the plight of the people. Wei Wuxian had perhaps inherited that as well - being a free soul who couldn't ignore those in trouble.

He brought along A Zhao - who had been officially adopted and renamed Wen Zhuliu, and found the gravely injured Wei couple. Wen Zhuliu carried them straight away to Wen Ruoyu for treatment. Had he been any minute later, the couple would have likely met their demise from the injuries. Not long after Lan Qiren found little Wei Ying and brought him to Nightless City. He doubted Wei Ying would remember it, the boy was unconscious and suffered from a terrible fever from his infected wounds. He had been chased by wild dogs while wandering around searching for food.

Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan came as soon as they heard the news to bring back the Wei family to Yunmeng and nurse them to health, and Lan Qiren had yet to see the boy since then. The Wei family stayed in Yunmeng only for a while before they resumed traveling again.

Lan Wangji however was already smitten from the first time he met Wei Wuxian. Lan Qiren didn't even know how and why. They only met during Jiang Wanyin's birthday celebration, how did his nephew fall so quickly?! Many times in the past Lan Qiren wondered what made Lan Wangji fall for the troublemaking gremlin. He thought it might have been his own doing, letting his nephew spend months with Wei Wuxian while supervising his punishment. If not, it had to be the Qishan Wen's indoctrination, in the Xuan Wu Cave - after all, Lan Wangji did start showing concerns for Wei Wuxian after that.

Now he wasn't even sure. All he knew was that by the time he arrived at Cloud Recesses and joined the family dinner, Bai Yiqing was mentioning how her lovely A Zhan couldn't wait to see A Ying and Lan Qiren nearly choked. Lan Xichen as always showed no disapproval, he was just as supportive. Qingheng Jun, just like his first son, wasn't bothered at all.

His two nephews weren't too different from the nephews he knew in his past timeline either. Lan Xichen was still just as kind and gentle. Lan Wangji was more quiet and serious, though Lan Qiren noticed that he was neither as stiff nor as cold as before. *Of course, his mother could raise him better than me*, Lan Qiren guiltily thought. He sighed and shook his head.

Whenever he was plagued with such thoughts, someone would always come and embrace him from the back, whispering comforting words. Unfortunately that person couldn't be here with him.

He prepared his teaching materials and headed to the classroom. So far Lan Wangji had yet to bring in Wei Wuxian for breaking any rules, so he counted it as an improvement. Perhaps Wei Changze managed to ingrain some manners into his son.

He was met with the awed gaze from the guest disciples. It must be unusual for them to see a man with the Gusu Lan forehead ribbon striding in while also draped in the outer robe of Qishan Wen's red. It was a stark contrast to the monotonous light colors of Gusu Lan. Lan Qiren took the seat right in the middle and his eyes met with the curious pair of grey irises.

Wei Wuxian still sat next to Jiang Wanyin and instead of looking bored while a senior disciple was reading the rules, he was looking at Lan Qiren with deep interest. Lan Qiren sat calmly, feigning ignorance of the way Wei Wuxian's gaze lingered from the forehead ribbon to the red Qishan Wen robes.

Then Wei Wuxian switched his attention to Lan Wangji and winked at him. Lan Wangji's ears were beginning to turn red and Lan Qiren found himself struggling to not yell. It was still too early to start shouting.

One by one each sect then gave their greeting and presented their gifts. Lanling Jin Sect as usual was just as pompous and extravagant. Lan Qiren recognized the same faces who came to the lecture - Jin Zixuan looked no different from the past. He had warned Yu Ziyuan to inform her martial sister about Jin Guangshan's womanising nature but there was really nothing more that he could do (as much as he secretly thought castration wasn't a bad option, he couldn't really do that).

Yu Zihua, who still became Madam Jin, did keep a close eye on her husband but seeing that Meng Yao was still there as Nie Huaisang's attendant, it was evident that she had failed to

stop him. He was still spawning illegitimate children here and there.

Yunmeng Jiang presented their gifts, then it was Qishan Wen's turn to give their greetings.

All eyes were on the pair of siblings clad in red.

Wen Qing could have attended the lecture long ago, but being a worrywart she decided to wait until her brother was ready so they could come to Gusu together. Wen Ning was still a shy and gentle boy, who occasionally still stuttered, but he had less trouble bonding with the other young disciples - though that still did not stop Wen Qing from being fiercely protective of her brother. She had been jokingly called a mother hen by her uncles, and Lan Qiren couldn't help thinking she really took after her father so much. Wen Ruoyu would not stop fussing about his cousin, no matter how many years had passed.

"I have a letter from Sect Leader Wen," Wen Qing added as she handed the gift. She ignored the obvious attention directed towards her. As the only female major sect heir and the favourite niece of Wen Ruohan, she was accustomed to receiving attention for a long while.

Even when Wen Xu and Wen Chao were around, she was already famous and favored for her talent. Here, Wen Xu and Wen Chao had not been born (perhaps they were born somewhere out there, just not as Wen Ruohan's sons). Since Wen Ruohan refused to take any concubine, Wen Qing had been named as the current sect heir while Wen Zhuliu became the son he doted on.

Yes, Wen Ruohan, who was a tyrant in another world, was in fact a clingy husband and a doting father. Wen Zhuliu had grown up into a tall and strong adult, yet he still treated their son with plenty of affections. Even after years of marriage, he had not gotten tired of showering Lan Qiren with praises and sickeningly sweet words. Which was why receiving a letter from Wen Ruohan made him happy, but it was also giving him shivers from anticipating the content.

Lan Xichen had a wide smile on his face while Lan Qiren could only feel dread. "You may hand it to me," he coughed.

"Sect Leader instructed me to read it out loud for you," said Wen Qing, taking out a piece of paper. Her brows furrowed.

Oh no. He recognized that look in Wen Qing's face. She had the same face as Wen Ruoyu whenever he had to deal with Wen Ruohan's nonsense.

She cleared her throat. "'To my dearest RenRen, your husband misses you very much'."

"Pfft!" Nie Huaisang quickly cupped his mouth while Wei Wuxian did not even bother to hide his large grin.

"I find it very unfair that you chose a bunch of unruly brats over me, your strong and handsome husband. I will send Liu-er to take over your place instead, as soon as he is done with his task. Without either you or Liu-er here, that little devil he brought here, Xue Yang, is

running wild and is giving me constant headaches. Only my husband's massage can heal me, no medicated balm is doing the job right'," Wen Qing continued.

He sure as heck was going back to Qishan just to give his husband a good whack on the head, for writing this letter and making Wen Qing read it out loud in front of all the guest disciples. Especially Wei Wuxian. Even Jiang Wanyin, who usually took his lesson seriously, looked like he was about to giggle now.

Wen Qing appeared as if she was absolutely appalled by the content of the letter but Lan Qiren swore she must have some sort of resentment towards him, otherwise why would she continue to read it? "I will not accept 'no' for an answer. If Gusu Lan refuses to send my beloved, esteemed spouse back to me, we will be forced to take actions. I will personally come and collect my spouse. Someone will be going down, and by that I mean' -"

"Enough!" Lan Qiren stopped her. Sect leader or not, a certain someone would be sleeping on the floor for three days after this.

The rest of the lessons went on without a hitch. Thankfully Wen Qing had the sense to stop and handed him the letter afterwards. The entire classroom's atmosphere did lighten up following the embarrassing love letter recital (was it his karma for making Wangji read Wei Wuxian's letter in the past?), with several of them giggling and grinning wide. It came at the expense of his pride, but at least the new disciples were in a considerably good mood.

It was hard to keep a straight face after that. Lan Wangji looked as if he had something stuck in his throat the whole time while Wei Wuxian was grinning through the entire lesson. Jin Zixuan seemed like he was trying very hard to pretend not to care; Nie Huaisang was fidgeting and silently muttering prayers under his breath so he would not get called to answer a question.

Anyone else who didn't stop snickering eventually did stop grinning after he began selecting students at random to answer questions. Lan Qiren nearly wanted to throw some surprise questions to Wei Wuxian, but decided against it since he knew the boy would be able to answer it anyway. He also wasn't looking forward to hearing about the boy tossing his ideas of manipulating resentful energy again.

They had worked so hard to stop everything. He did not want anyone - not Wei Wuxian, not his husband - to ever use something that would backfire on them.

He returned to his room and Lan Qiren grimaced as he read the rest of the content. Heavens, he would die from embarrassment if anyone were to discover this letter. Why did Wen Ruohan have to write down things normally uttered only in bed right on this piece of paper?

He heard Wangji's voice calling for him outside and quickly hid the letter underneath a stack of books. "Come in."

Lan Qiren tidied up his work desk a little. He looked up and was stunned to see Wei Wuxian coming in along. Lesson had ended less than an hour ago, was he already breaking rules? Though, Wangji's expression was rather soft.

"We have something important to tell you, Uncle," Lan Wangji announced.

Only then did Lan Qiren notice the two boys were holding hands. Oh no. Oh dear. Did they already get together now? Within just several hours of reuniting after their last meeting when they were children? How?!

Lan Wangji remained calm despite all the turmoil and questions in his uncle's mind. Instead Wei Wuxian was the one to initiate the conversation. "We remember, Uncle."

Uncle? *Uncle*?! The brat dared to call him Uncle already? Just how far did they go that Wangji was already making Wei Wuxian part of the family now?!

"Who are you calling 'Uncle', you..." Lan Qiren paused as he realized something. His eyes widened. "Hold on. What do you mean by 'you remember'?"

Wei Wuxian grinned. "We've lived this life once. Though, it wasn't quite the same as it is now."

Realization dawned upon Lan Qiren. "... The time-travelling talisman. Since when?"

"Since birth, perhaps," Lan Wangji answered.

"Birth?!" Lan Qiren gasped in shock. That couldn't be possible. Well, yes, Wangji's personality remained almost the same despite being raised by a completely different person in a different environment. However, weren't Xichen and most of the other youngsters not that different either? Moreover, if he already had his memories since birth, why did he only choose to reveal the truth now?

Wei Wuxian nodded. "Well, we did have the memories since birth, but we could not actually 'utilize' it, to say. The talisman I made doesn't actually send your entire soul, but rather only your memories to the past. They came bit by bit in a blur and we did not have the mental capacity to understand them. When I first met Lan Zhan here, all I felt was a sense of familiarity and affections, but I couldn't figure out the reason why - until I was old enough and able to form my golden core."

The reason why Lan Qiren was able to properly retain and process all the transferred memories was because he was already a matured man with a properly cultivated golden core. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian on the other hand had received the memories when their brains were not prepared to process them - hence they were automatically repressed until they were ready.

"Why did you use the talismans on yourself? Wouldn't you two...?" Lan Qiren gawked.

"Nobody died, Uncle," Lan Wangji assured him. "You did get into a temporary coma for a few days, but nothing else happened."

"I felt guilty, you know! I was just experimenting... anyway, nothing actually happened to you in our original timeline. You only woke up with a little confusion, but nothing else - you went back to your usual self after that. That's why Lan Zhan and I decided to try the talismans ourselves," Wei Wuxian explained.

Lan Wangji nodded. "Wei Ying and I were worried that you were alone and in trouble here."

After observing no changes in Lan Qiren's physical, spiritual, and mental condition, Wei Wuxian decided to investigate the effect of the talismans himself. Perhaps because the divergence in events had taken place even before they were born, memories of their original timeline came right after they were born. He could feel instant connections to Lan Wangji, to his soulmate - from the very moment he met him again.

Similarly he also felt affections for the Jiang family even during their first time meeting. Even his cynophobia did not disappear. However, this time his parents were there with him, alive and slowly recovering. Jiang Fengmian only had the dogs temporarily stay in a different building. Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Yanli made him plenty of soup. Jiang Cheng accompanied him and played with him. They went swimming and picked lotus pods together. They got scolded together.

The repressed memories slowly began re-emerging once he started cultivating. At first he couldn't understand what those glimpses of conflicting memories were. It wasn't until he had formed his golden core, that he was able to make sense of them and recalled everything, including how he had used the talismans on himself and Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian smiled. "It was overwhelming, but it's also thanks to the slow and gradual process that Lan Zhan and I were able to get used to everything. It's so awkward, knowing Wen Zhuliu of all people - the guy who in another life had killed so many of people dear to us - now is the guy who saved my parents."

"You knew that?" Lan Qiren asked.

"My parents would never let me forget. I didn't forget you too, Uncle. You were the one who retrieved me from that street, weren't you? I didn't get to thank you for that," Wei Wuxian chuckled. "You do like me after all!"

Lan Qiren coughed and looked away. "I was just doing what's right."

"Hmm..." Wei Wuxian then grinned widely as he leaned against Lan Wangji to snuggle closer to him. "Doing what's right huh? Does that include marrying Wen Ruohan?"

Lan Qiren instantly choked. Wei Wuxian burst out in laughter, even slapping his own thighs repeatedly as he found the situation too hilarious.

"Who knew you'd do something so outrageous, Uncle. Seducing Wen Ruohan to change history? Oh, you Lan Clan men are such a surprise~"

An angry vein popped on Lan Qiren's face. "Whose fault was it, if not you and your father?"

Wei Wuxian snickered and shrugged. "Marrying the enemy would have been one of the last things in my mind. You even put on a dress, let my mom shave your beard willingly, and had Aunt Yu do your makeup."

"Wei Ying!" Lan Qiren's voice thundered and his face began to turn scarlet from recalling all the embarrassing feats he had done in his youth, all to secure the future he had now. However, noticing how Wei Wuxian now referred to Yu Ziyuan as 'Aunt Yu' instead of 'Madam Yu', his heart softened a little.

"Alright, alright, I'm not teasing anymore. My parents would be livid if I offend our saviour," Wei Wuxian giggled.

Lan Qiren took a deep breath and sighed. "None of what we have today would have worked out if it weren't for everyone's collective effort. I'm not a saviour. If anything, it was your invention that gave us all a chance."

He never thought of himself as a saviour. He had changed something indeed and a lot of things had gotten better, but the world was still far from perfect. He couldn't help the Nie Clan with their problem. He couldn't save all the women who were victimized by Jin Guangshan, as well as the children who had to live with the burden. Lan Qiren also felt that he owed it to the younger generation as well for his own growth.

"Still," Wei Wuxian smiled and suddenly bowed down in respect, surprising Lan Qiren. Lan Wangji too, had assumed a similar posture. "Thank you. For everything."

Lan Qiren fell silent. He thought of the past, of all the things they had changed, of everything that could have happened. He looked back at the red garment on his sleeves and wanted to laugh.

Seduce the enemy to save the world, as it turned out, wasn't a bad idea after all.

Wei Wuxian blinked as he noticed a slip of paper peeking out from underneath the stacks of books. He grinned and sneakily reached for the letter. "Oho? Isn't this the one your husband sent? As fellow men in the same position, why don't we share our experience~" Wei Wuxian cackled, then paused as he read the content. "Oh my, you two are so..."

"WEI YING!!!"

He sent Wei Wuxian to copy the rules, this time with Lan Xichen overseeing the punishment instead and ordered Lan Wangji to meditate. The letter from Wen Ruohan had been tucked into his pouch safely, away from any naughty wandering hands. Lan Qiren continued writing down his lesson plans before finally retiring for the night.

He woke up a little before the crack of dawn, feeling warmer than he did the night before. There was a warm hand gently caressing his cool cheek, the slightly rough finger pads playfully pressing against his skin.

Normally he would have been extremely alarmed by the fact that someone managed to sneak into his room undetected at night. However, Lan Qiren recognized the scent. He was very familiar with the soft hum and the deep voice. After all, he had felt and memorized all the curves of this person, and he had missed waking up next to him.

He leaned into the touch and felt an inexplicable warmth when a pair of lips descended gently on his forehead. The fingers moved to comb his hair, then traveled to the nape of his neck, massaging the part that often felt stiff in the morning. Lan Qiren's hand absentmindedly went to the other's jaw, cupping it lightly, then moved to the back of his ear and letting his fingers glide there, where he knew his beloved liked to be touched.

"Good morning, RenRen."

Wen Ruohan pressed another chaste kiss, this time in between his brows and Lan Qiren opened his eyes. His husband was dressed fully, meaning he had just arrived. "You're fast."

"I used the talisman."

"You used an emergency talisman and wasted your energy for this?"

"I couldn't sleep. It felt so cold and empty without you," Wen Ruohan murmured, pulling him in closer. "We've shared a bed for over twenty years now. It's so horrible, waking up alone."

Lan Qiren buried his face against his husband's chest. Knowing Wen Ruohan felt just as lonely without him somehow made him feel a little happy and giddy inside. He smiled as he inhaled the familiar musky scent and lightly pecked the exposed skin on his chest.

The kiss however ignited the desire inside Wen Ruohan and his hand moved from Lan Qiren's back down to squeeze his rear. Immediately Lan Qiren was reminded of the letter that contained a very explicit description of things Wen Ruohan was planning to do. He grunted and pushed his husband away, kicking him off the bed.

"RenRen!" Wen Ruohan protested.

"You should have thought more before you made your niece read your embarrassing letter," Lan Qiren rolled his eyes.

Wen Ruohan pouted. He climbed back into the bed and draped himself over Lan Qiren's back. "How will I make it known that you belong to me?"

"There is nobody you need to worry about," Lan Qiren retorted. *I've only ever been yours.* "Have I not been wearing your colours all these years?"

Wen Ruohan grinned. His eyes darted at the white ribbon tied around his wrist. It was already quite old, with a couple of frayed knots and a small stain that couldn't get off. He had been

wearing the same ribbon on his wrist for the past two decades. "Have I told you how good you look?"

They were two people, who met by pure coincidence.

"Everyday," Lan Qiren sighed, but his lips curved up with bliss.

But Lan Qiren now believed it was fate.

Their fingers interlaced with each other and Wen Ruohan rested his chin on his husband's shoulder. "I heard Wei Changze's son is here now. Tell me about him. Isn't he the inventor?"

Lan Qiren chuckled. "You wouldn't believe this, but..."

They spent the early morning, just talking. Enjoying the presence of each other. Receiving delight in hearing each other's voice. Enveloped in warmth and contentment, as they watched the sunrise through the window together.

Chapter End Notes

It's not a perfect ending, there's still unresolved things, but the rest will be for the young generations to hurdle through. I hope you enjoyed reading it <3 Please show more love for WenQi! (^u^)/

Also just gonna put this here, if anyone's inspired to make something in the future OwO
<https://twitter.com/wenqiweek/status/1361221793281794050>

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